

The Impact of Freshman Year Learning Community Participation on Students' Self-Reported Sense of Meaning in Life, Academic Self-efficacy and Commitment to Academic Major at the Beginning of the Second Academic Year

by

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Abstract

Student retention is one of the most studied areas in higher education. Much of the focus has been on providing services to aid in retention efforts from the first to the second academic year. Freshman seminar classes as well as learning community programs have become common on college campuses to provide students with the resources and support to help retain them to the next academic year. However, little research has looked at the impact of learning community participation related to the sophomore slump.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact freshman year learning community participation on students' self reported academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of their second academic year. The conceptual framework used for this study was Chickering's (1969) Theory of Identity Development.

Two groups of students were administered portions of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schreiner, 2007) at the beginning of their second academic year to assess sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy, and commitment to academic major. The first group was a treatment group consisting of students that participated in a learning community during the 2009-2010 academic year. The second was a control group consisting of students that did not participate in a learning community during the 2009-2010 academic year but independently completed a freshman seminar course during the academic year.

A number of independent samples t-tests were conducted to look for differences between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants in regard to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major. The analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups for each of the measures. However, analysis showed that learning community participants that identified as very sure of academic major had significantly higher academic self-efficacy scores than learning community students that did not indicate being very sure of academic major. In addition, an analysis was conducted on individual questions and found that learning community participants had significantly higher scores for “I know what makes my life meaningful”. Also, participants in both groups had significantly higher sense of meaning in life scores when they self identified as being very sure of academic major. However, there was no significant difference in commitment to major between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Tinto (1982) noted that once students progress beyond the initial transition to college they are most likely to dropout at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second academic year. According to Lipka (2006), sophomores are the equivalent of “academic middle children.” For many students, this is a time of uncertainty and disengagement from the college community. The U.S Department of Education reported that two-thirds as many students drop out during the second academic year as the first (Lipka, 2006). The reality of sophomore attrition has brought more attention to the concept of the sophomore or second year slump. The phrase “sophomore slump” was first used by Freedman (1956), to describe the observation that sophomores or second year students appeared to be the least satisfied of all students on campus. Since this first observation, researchers have elaborated on the phenomenon. Margolis (1976) noted that the sophomore slump is somewhat of an “identity crisis” for students and involves the academic, social and personal self. Furr and Gannaway (1982) described the sophomore slump as a time of confusion and uncertainty that student’s encounter during their second academic year. Research into the phenomenon has provided insight into specific issues related to the crisis: a) lack of sense of purpose; b) uncertainty about major and/or career plans; c) dissatisfaction with experiences at the university and/or personal relationships; d) reduced motivation; and e) declining academic performance (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Schreiner, 2007).

While many researchers have acknowledged the existence of the sophomore slump and the relationship to retention, Lemons and Richmond (1987) provided a theoretical framework to the phenomenon utilizing Chickering's (1969) model of student development to explain the unique issues students face during the second academic year. Chickering (1969) described seven vectors of college student development: a) developing competence; b) managing emotions; c) moving from autonomy toward interdependence; d) developing mature interpersonal relationships; e) establishing identity; f) developing purpose; and g) developing integrity. Lemons and Richmond (1987) proposed four specific vectors as problem areas related to the sophomore slump: achieving competence, developing autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose.

Within each vector related to sophomore development are key factors or components to address. The vector of achieving competence focuses on the development of intellectual, physical and interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students who do not achieve competence or recognition in one of these areas often feel ineffective and dissatisfied with the college experience (Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Generally, sophomore students aspire to reach competencies in areas that extend beyond those met during the freshman year. If unable, they may view themselves as incompetent, thus contributing to the sophomore slump (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

Moving through autonomy toward interdependence involves students learning to develop emotional independence, self-direction, problem-solving skills, persistence and mobility (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, this is also a time when there is recognition of the importance of interdependence with the surrounding world. Specific problem areas related to sophomore students includes the development of emotional and

instrumental independence. Emotional independence involves the student learning to function on his/her own without the reassurance approval of parents and other authority figures. Instrumental independence involves student's ability to cope and care for himself (Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Many sophomore students are dealing with issues of becoming emotionally independent while still physically/financially dependant on parental support (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

The development of a stable identity is a central theme during the college years and involves the individual's self-concept. Self-concept includes all the events, feelings, actions and perceptions of the individual (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Lemons and Richmond (1987) noted that the sophomore year may be a time when students face increased difficulties in identity development.

Developing purpose involves the student searching for direction and commitment to vocation, recreation and lifestyle goals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Within this vector is the concept of developing career goals and making commitments to those choices. Difficulty within this area for sophomore students often revolves around choosing a major and making decision related to future career goals (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

The issue of sophomore attrition is important because student retention rates are an important measure of institutional success on college campuses. With more than forty years of research it is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education (Woodard, Mallory, & De Luca, 2001). The pressure to understand student retention comes from both internal and external forces in the college setting. Retention numbers are often used by university administrators as a way to evaluate institutional effectiveness (Astin, Korn,

& Green, 1987). In addition, colleges and universities have experienced external calls for accountability related to student success, student retention and graduation (Woodard et al., 2001)

Woodard et al., (2001) completed a review of retention research and identified variables related to student retention and graduation rates. The researchers identified four categories or “spheres of influence” related to retention to include: 1) student characteristics, 2) institution-wide characteristics, 3) academic good practices, and 4) student services good practices (Woodard et al., 2001). Within the sphere of student characteristics the authors identified academic self-efficacy, sense of purpose and major decidedness as key concepts that impact student retention.

Bandura (1978, 1986, 1997) defined self-efficacy as one’s belief in the capabilities to learn and perform behaviors at a designated level. Research in the area of self-efficacy has found that the concept plays an important role in academic achievement, (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Choi, 2005; Pajares & Schunk, 2001) career decisions (Bores-Rangel, Church, Szendre & Reeves, 1990) and persistence and retention of college students, specifically sophomore students (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Choi (2005) noted that college students with higher levels of self-efficacy attain higher levels of achievement than those with lower self-efficacy scores. Additionally, Chemers et al., (2001) found a relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance and personal adjustment of first year college students. They also noted that self-efficacy had a predictive power above and beyond the measures of past performance measures often consider as important to retention, such as high school grade point average. In relation to sophomore or second year students, Vuong et al., (2010) looked at the relationship

between self-efficacy scores and academic success, as defined by GPA and persistence rates of first and second generation college sophomores. The research found that GPA and persistence rates were a function of self-efficacy for all sophomore students, regardless of college generation.

The development of self-efficacy has been linked to four sources: personal performance accomplishment, vicarious learning, social persuasion and emotional arousal (Lent, Lopez & Bieschke, 1991). The relationship between peer groups and higher levels of self-efficacy has been noted. Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman (1989) found that students in peer groups tend to be similar to one another which enhance the likelihood of modeling behavior. Schunk (1987) stressed that impact that the peer group can have on an individual, noting that observing similar others succeed can raise an observers' self efficacy. Given the importance of self-efficacy in relation to sophomore year retention, as well as the established peer groups associated with learning communities, self-efficacy scores at the beginning of the sophomore year is of interest in this study.

Another sphere of influence regarding sophomore year retention relates to purpose or meaning in life (Woodard et al., 2001). Ryff and Singer (1998) defined meaning as goal directedness and purposefulness in one's life. Klinger (1977) noted that people create meaning in their lives through the pursuit of important goals. This relates directly to the vector of developing purpose and search for direction and commitment to life goals. Research has shown that possessing meaning in life relates to a number of life aspects including, work satisfaction (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann , 2000), psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) and the ability to cope with stressful situations and experiences (Park & Folkman, 1997).

The concept of commitment to major or major decidedness is intertwined with both self-efficacy and sense of purpose. Several studies have noted that students without a strong commitment to an academic major are more prone to attrition than students with a level of major commitment (Gordon, 1995; Groccia & Harrity, 1991; Plaud, Baker, & Groccia, 1990). However, Lewallen (1993) noted that a lack of major does not directly correlate to a lack of commitment to goal attainment. Titley and Titley (1980) stress the importance of viewing changes in major as a reflection of the developmental process students address during college and not a lack of commitment.

Previous research on learning communities has shown that participation has an impact on the freshman year. Tinto and Goodsell (1993) found that freshman at a large public research university who participated in a program made up of linked courses, called a Freshman Interest Groups, had higher grades and greater persistence rates than students that did not participate in similar learning experiences (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition, research on residential learning communities has found that participants report greater social interaction with peers, extra curricular involvement, higher persistence and gains in critical thinking and reading comprehension, all indicators of student success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

While research on learning community participation has shown a positive impact on freshman year retention and development, the long term effects on student success is not well researched. In general, most studies on student success and retention efforts have focused on the freshman year and student retention to the sophomore year. Consequently, there has been little attention on the year after the learning community

experience, specifically related to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning and commitment to academic major.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of freshman year learning community participation on students' self reported academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of their second academic year. The conceptual framework used for this study was Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1969).

Two groups of students were administered portions of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schreiner, 2007) at the beginning of their second academic year to assess sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy, and commitment to academic major. The first group was a treatment group consisting of students that participated in a learning community during the 2009-2010 academic year. The second was a control group consisting of students that did not participate in a learning community during the 2009-2010 academic year but independently completed a freshman seminar course during the academic year.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher academic self-efficacy scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

2. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher sense of meaning in life scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?
3. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have a higher commitment to major score than the students who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Statistical Hypothesis

1. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will be no difference in the academic self-efficacy scores between the learning community group and the control group that did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year.
2. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will be no difference in the sense of meaning in life scores between the learning community group and the control group that did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year.
3. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will be no difference in the “commitment to major” score between the learning community group and the control group that consists of student that did not participate in a freshman learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year.

Significance of the Study

Increased risk for attrition, as well as the implications of the freshman year on overall student success, has prompted the development of first-year programs to address freshman student needs (Barefoot, 2000; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984). However, there has been little research on the long-term impact of such programs after the first year experience. If the learning community experience provides students with growth in developmental areas beyond those found in freshman success classes, then increased implementation will benefit overall institutional retention rates. Ultimately, this study will contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding first-year learning communities and second year student development.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are relevant to this study:

1. Sample of students involved were representative of the larger population (normal distribution and equal variances).
2. Participants completing the survey provided truthful and accurate responses.
3. Findings may be generalized to students attending schools outside of the geographic region of this study.
4. The online survey program (SurveyMonkey) maintained accurate participant responses.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was limited to undergraduate students at a large public research university in the southeastern United States. Additionally, participants voluntarily chose to participate in the study, and therefore, the results can only be generalized to students with similar characteristics.

Definitions

The following are definitions of terms used in this study:

Freshman: First year full time college students, regardless of hours brought in through advanced placement and/or accelerated learning programs

Sophomore: The traditional definition of sophomore is a student with 30-59 total credit hours. However, the purpose of this study is to look at the second year experience at the university, regardless of the exact number of academic credits. Sophomore refers to any student in the second academic year in college

Learning Community: For the purpose of this study learning community is defined as an organized group of students taking two or more classes together (MacGregor, Matthew & Gabelnick 2004)

Self-Efficacy: An individuals' belief in the capabilities to learn and perform behaviors at a designated level. (Bandura, 1978, 1986, 1997)

Sense of Meaning in Life: goal directedness and purposefulness in one's life (Ryff & Singer, 1998)

Student involvement: the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1984)

Career indecision: as a state where students are unable to make a decision about their career direction. (Guay, Sevecal, Larose, & Deschenes, 2006)

Freshman seminar course: A course dedicate to providing students with an introduction to college and includes topics related to adjustment, academic success and career planning (Gordon & Grites, 1984).

Retention: The ability of a particular institution to graduate the students that initially enrolled (Berger & Lyon, 2005)

GPA: Grade Point Average

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction. This chapter discusses the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and definitions regarding the study. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides information related to the population and sample, research design, data collection procedures, reliability, and the procedures for the analysis of the data. Chapter 4 reports the findings in relation to the research questions. Lastly, Chapter 5 provides conclusions and discussions based on the findings, as well as recommendations for future study and practice.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Retention is one of the most studied areas in higher education (Astin, 1971; Bean 1980; Pantages & Creedon 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Reason, 2009; Sexton 1965; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988; Tinto, 1975). Berger and Lyon (2005) defined retention as “the ability of a particular college or university to successfully graduate the students that initially enrolled at the institution” (p. 3). College and university administrators use student retention data not only to assess overall institutional effectiveness and student satisfaction (Astin et al., 1987), but to formulate administrative policies and develop recruitment strategies (Avakian, MacKinney, & Allen, 1982). Additionally, Pantages and Creedon (1978) noted that student retention impacts institutional operations as well as finances. Woodard et al., (2001) concluded “retention is of great importance and touches almost every realm of the American Higher Education system” (p. 53).

Student retention was not always a concern to educational administrators. In the early history of higher education the number of individuals achieving a college degree was low. Aspirations within the general population to attend college were low as well. Because higher education was generally reserved for a small student population composed mostly of privileged individuals, retention was not studied or addressed by academic administrators. However, retention became an area of concern as the

population of college students grew as well as the demand for college educated individuals within society (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

In the 1960's, the early theories of retention emerged with the work of Alexander Astin and William Spady. However, it was not until the 1970's that retention became a common word among college administrators (Berger & Lyon, 2005). In 1991, the United States Congress developed the Federal Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act which requires colleges and universities to publish data detailing the quality of their programs. Graduation rates for students entering each institution are one measure institutions are required to publish each year. The purpose of this legislation was twofold: 1) to enable consumers of higher education (students and parents) to make educated decisions when selecting institution and 2) make institutions more accountable to consumers and the federal government (Astin, 1997, 2005). The common assumption drawn from institutional retention data is that institutions with higher retention rates are in some way superior to those with lower retention rates. (Astin, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whit, 2005).

Caision (2005) noted, "Higher education is a sizeable investment, both for governments and families; thus, student retention measures have emerged as a gauge of institutional effectiveness and have therefore become an issue of strategic importance for the organization." (p. 426). However, retention is not a simple concept that is easily measured. Mortenson (2005) cautioned that no individual data will provide all the answers needed. Additionally, research has shown that student variables, including pre-college preparation and background, as well as institutional characteristics, including type of institution and admissions standards, all impact student retention rates.

Student Input Factors

Student preparation and measures of achievement have been linked to college student retention (Allen 1999; Astin, 1971; Astin & Osequera, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005; Ishanti & DesJardins, 2002-2003; Lenning et al., (1980); Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini 1983; Tinto, 1975; Tross, Harper, Osher & Kneidinger, 2000; Wegner & Sewell, 1969; Woodard et al., 2001). Pre-college factors attributed to influence retention include; high school GPA (Allen, 1999; Astin, 1971; Lenning, et al., 1980; Nora, et al., 2005; Pantages & Creedon, 1978), high school class rank (Astin, 1975; Lenning et al., 1980) academic rating of high school (Astin, 1975; Lenning et al., 1980) and academic aptitude as measured by SAT scores (Ishanti & DesJardins 2002-2003; Lenning, et al., 1980; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). Astin (1971, 1975) also found high school grades to be the most consistent predictor of college retention.

Similarly, Cabrera et al., (2005) discovered that moderately prepared students were more likely to complete a degree within ten years than less academically prepared students. Astin (1971) also echoed the importance of entrance scores, “persistence is closely related to academic ability as measured by college admissions tests” (p. 24). However, research by Nora et al., (2005) and Ishanti and DesJaridns (2002-2003) found that SAT scores were less predictive of student retention after the first year of college. Additionally, research on SAT scores has shown them be even less predictive of retention and degree completion among black student (Astin, 1975; Astin & Osequera, 2005). Nora et al., (2005) concluded that high school GPA is a better predictor of college

persistence. However, the same researchers also found the impact of high school GPA becomes less significant as the student progresses in college. While acknowledging the role of academic variables, Pantages and Creedon (1978) stressed that they were not the only variables that contribute to attrition.

Table 1

Pre-college factors and Relevant Research

Pre-College Factors	Relevant Research
High School GPA	Allen, 1999; Astin, 1971; Lenning, Beal & Sauer, 1980; Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005; Pantages & Creedon, 1978
High School Rank	Astin, 1995; Lenning, Beal & Sauer, 1980
Academic Rating of High School	Astin, 1995; Lenning, Beal & Sauer, 1980
Academic Aptitude Scores	Astin, 1971; Astin, 1975; Astin & Osequerer, 2005; Ishantani & DesJardins, 2002; Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980; Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005; Pantages & Creedon, 1978

The impact of family and background is another area researched in regards to student retention. Astin (1971) found that entering freshman who indicated no religious preference were the most likely to drop out of college. Additionally, students who identified as Jewish were the least likely to dropout (Astin, 1971, 1975). Astin (1975) also found a relationship between family income and college retention. However, Astin (1996) also noted that the impact of family income can be mediated by other factors including; student ability, parental education level and student concern regarding finances. Additionally, researchers have found that growing up in a small town negatively impacts retention (Astin, 1975; Cope, 1972; Newman, 1965).

The impact of gender on retention has shown conflicting results. Pascarella and Terrenzini (1983) found evidence that in the longitudinal process leading to decisions of institutional persistence/withdrawal, gender was a significant factor. However, Lenning et al., (1980) and Pantages and Creedon (1978) found gender was not a significant variable related to retention. Avakian et al., (1982) discovered that retention rates were higher among males than females. Similarly, Astin (1971) noted that while women are more likely to attain higher grades than males, females as a group had higher attrition rates. This finding indicates that female attrition is related to factors other than academic failure. Astin (1975) and Tinto (1975) both found that men were more likely to identify academic difficulties as the reason for departure from school than females. Research by Nora et al., (2005) found that women had higher graduation rates than their male counterparts. Nora et al., (2005) asserted “the evidence confirms that overall performance of female students has surpassed that of males from cumulative GPA to persistence rates to graduation rates” (p. 42). Research by Astin (1972) and Astin et al., (1984) found that women were more likely than men to complete a degree in four years. However, they also found that overall men were slightly more likely to persist until graduation when graduate rates were extended beyond the four year time frame. However, regardless of gender, students leaving institutions gave several common reasons: boredom with classes, financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with requirements, and change of career goal (Astin, 1972).

Retention studies have linked socioeconomic status (SES) as a factor in student retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1972, 1975). Astin (1972) found that students with a higher SES had greater outcomes in college than lower income students. Research by

Ishanti and DesJardins (2002-2003) supported Astin's (1972) claim that lower income students are more likely to dropout than are higher income students. However, Lenning et al., (1980) cautioned that the result of SES on retention is not entirely clear. Research by Pantages and Creedon (1978) also found that SES is limiting in terms of predicting attrition of students. Additionally, Wegner and Sewell (1969) argued that the issues with SES relates back to institutional type and fit. The researchers argued that students of different SES groups will be successful at different types of colleges, suggesting that it is the fit and not the SES that lead to attrition.

Research on student age and retention has shown conflicting results. Early research into retention found a relationship between age and attrition (Astin, 1971, 1975; Newman, 1965; Trent & Medsker, 1967). However, Lenning et al., (1980) and Sexton (1965) concluded that age was not a primary factor in student retention. Bean and Metzner (1985) however, found attrition is higher for students categorized as non-traditional (over 25 years of age). While the enrollment of non-traditional students grows on college campuses the graduation rate for these students is much lower than the traditional aged student. They agree the difference is not so much a result of the age of the student, but more so the impact of outside factors, including family responsibility and employment that impact retention. The impact of outside factors also caused non-traditional students to have less interaction with peers and faculty, be less involved in extra curricular activities and less likely to use student services. Therefore, lack of involvement may be the cause of higher attrition rates between non-traditional and traditional aged students.

Student Retention Models

Research into causes of student attrition has led to the development of several models or theories to explain student retention behavior. Bean (1982) noted the model of student attrition is a representation of the factors presumed to influence decisions to drop out of an institution. “The model identifies the interrelationships among the various factors and the relationships between these factors and the drop out decision” (p. 18).

Astin (1984) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980,1983) emphasized the role of student involvement or student engagement in the learning process. Astin (1984) defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (p. 297). He theorized that retention is directly related to involvement whereas dropout behavior is related to lack of involvement within the college setting. Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement has five basic postulates:

- 1) Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects;
- 2) Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum;
- 3) Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features;
- 4) The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program, and;
- 5) The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) also emphasized the importance of student interaction with the college environment over student’s pre-enrollment characteristics. Several researchers found that student retention rates are higher for students who are academically and socially involved with the university, as well as with peers and faculty

(Astin, 1984; Nora, 2001-2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Additionally, Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling (1996) noted the importance of out-of-class experiences with peers and faculty for student development.

Types of student involvement positively related to student retention include; living on campus (Astin 1972, 1975, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Terenzini et al., 1996), participating in social sororities and fraternities (Astin, 1975, 1984), involvement in intercollegiate sports (Astin, 1975), enrollment in honors programs (Astin 1975, 1984), participation in ROTC (Astin 1975, 1984), completing an internship (Terenzini et al., 1996), participating in study abroad (Terenzini et al., 1996) and part-time on-campus employment (Astin, 1972, 1975, 1984; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Table 2

Student Engagement and Relevant Research

Type of Involvement	Relevant Research
Living on-campus	Astin, 1972; Astin, 1975; Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1984; Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996
Social Sororities and Fraternities	Astin, 1975; Astin, 1984
Intercollegiate Sports	Astin, 1975
Honors Programs	Astin, 1975; Astin, 1984
ROTC	Astin, 1975; Astin 1984
Internships	Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996
Study Abroad	Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996
On-Campus Employment	Astin, 1972; Astin, 1975; Astin, 1984; Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996

In 1975, Tinto developed the Model of Student Departure to explain institutional dropout behavior. Tinto based this model on Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide. Durkheim's model attributed suicide as the failure of an individual to integrate into the fabric of the larger society. Tinto attributed decisions to leave college as involving failure to integrate into the society of the college or university. Tinto (1975) noted:

One can reasonably expect then, that social conditions affecting dropout from the social system of college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the larger society; namely, insufficient interaction with others in the college and insufficient congruency with the prevailing value patterns of the college collectivity. (p. 92)

Tinto (1975) described the decision to drop out of college as "an outcome of a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social system of the institutions with such experience coming to bear on the individual's commitment to college completion and commitment to the institution" (p. 94). Tinto ascertained that integration into the academic system of the institution most directly affects goal commitment while social integration directly relates an individual's institutional commitment. Academic interactions included the ability for the student to meet the academic standards of the institutions as well as the student's intellectual development and the intellectual expectations of the institution. Similarly, social integration refers to the levels of involvement and congruency between the individual and his/her social environment. Co-curricular activities, peer groups and interactions with faculty are key pieces related to social integration (Tinto, 1975).

As both academic and social integration into the institutions increases, so does the commitment to the goal of degree completion (Tinto, 1975). Pascarella and Terenzini (1983), Lemons and Richmond (1987) and Wilder (1993), support Tinto's premise that both goal and institutional commitment are related to student retention. Astin (1975)

supports the premise that degree aspirations are linked to college persistence and found students entering college with the goal of obtaining a doctorate or professional degree are the least likely to drop out of college. However, students who enter college with the goal to obtain a bachelor's degree have the greatest chance of dropping out" (Astin, 1975).

In developing his model, Tinto sought to address two key issues with previous research regarding student retention; ability to define the population as well as the ability to move beyond a description of dropouts to a model that explains how the characteristics affect dropout decisions. Tinto (1982) stressed that students have different reasons for attending college and those goal may or may not involve degree completion. Tinto cautioned that attrition is not synonymous with failure.

Tinto (1975) also attributed student characteristics such as pre-college preparation gender and ethnicity as factors that impact a student's degree and institutional commitment. Cabrera et al., (2005) found a relationship between SES and degree aspirations. Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) found that social integration had a greater impact for women on persistence and that academic integration had a great impact on the retention of males.

Institutional Retention Trends

Colleges and universities with higher retention rates are presumed to be better than those with lower retention rates (Astin, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005). The type of institution (2-year versus 4-year and public versus private) as well as institutional characteristics, such as selectivity, cost, and size, also relate to student persistence (Wegner & Sewell, 1969; Tinto, 1975). Research has consistently shown that retention and graduation rates differ based on the type of institution attended. For instance,

graduation rates are significantly higher at four-year institutions than two year institutions (Astin 1972, 1975, 1984; Lenning et al., 1980; Bradburn, 2002). Additionally, several researchers have noted that persistence rates are higher at private schools than at public institutions (Astin, 2005; Astin, et al., 1984; Mortenson, 2005; Tinto, 1975). Astin et al.,(1984) found that students were twice as likely to complete a degree in four years if they attended a private rather than a public school.

In addition to simply the type of institution attended, other institutional factors have been identified as being associated with increased rates including; the level of admissions selectivity (Astin, 1975, 2005; Astin & Panos, 1969; Stoecker et al., 1988), cost of tuition (Astin, 1975; Lenning et al., 1980), religious affiliation, specifically Roman Catholic and Protestant institutions (Astin,1975, 1984; Lenning et al., 1980) a clearly defined mission (Lenning et al., 1980.) institutions granting doctoral degrees (Mortenson, 2005) and a prestigious reputation (Lenning et al, 1980.)

While research supports that student retention rates vary based on the type of institution attended, many researchers also caution that student characteristics attribute to the institutional differences. Astin (1972) noted that while higher GPA and SAT scores correlate with higher retention rates, GPA and SAT scores are not used by all institutions when making admissions decisions. Astin also cautioned that dropout rates of institutions will vary based on the student qualifications set by individual admissions policies. Jaffee and Adams (1970) found that the most prepared students tend to select 4-year institutions over two year colleges. Berger and Lyon (2005) noted that less selective schools tend to attract students who are less likely to be retained. “Under these conditions, raw retention rates may unfairly penalize those institutions that admit less

prepared students and bestow undeserved credit on those that are highly selective in their admission process” (p. 14). Two-year and community colleges generally have open enrollment policies, indicative of low selectivity. However, when Astin (1972) looked at expected retention rates at 2-year and 4-year schools he found that students had a better chance of graduating from a four-year institution than a two-year college regardless of pre-enrollment characteristics. Later, Astin (1984) attributed this difference to be the result of the amount of involvement at each type of institution and not necessarily a reflection of the quality of institutions. He noted that two-year institutions generally have less involvement by students as well as faculty. Berger and Lyon (2005) noted the complexity of the issues extends further than simply the type of institution; “Levels of preparation, motivations, and other individual characteristics shape the reasons why students attend college and directly impact the chances that students will be retained at a particular type of institution and ultimately persist to earn a post secondary degree” (p.2). The reasons that students give for leaving also differ depending on the type of institutions.

Bradburn (2002) found that students leaving two-year institutions cited changes in family status and the need to work to be the most common reasons whereas students cited academic difficulties when leaving four-year institutions. Wegner and Sewell (1969) acknowledged the role of student variables but also noted that the type of institution was also a factor. However, they also cautioned that looking at graduation rates in regard to institution is difficult due to the fact that some of the students may have transferred to a four-year college prior to graduating from the first institution.

Retention by Academic Year

Summerskill (1965) conducted a review of literature regarding student attrition and found that the average loss of students in four years was approximately 50 percent. Astin (1975) also found 85 percent of student attrition occurs during the first two years of college. Similarly, Tinto (1996) observed that most students leave before the beginning of the second academic year. Overall, the percentage of students leaving before graduation was highest in the first year and lowest during the third (Bradburn, 2002). However, student attrition is a reality in each academic year (Noel & Levitz, 1991; Pattengale, 2000). Pattengale (2000) noted “institutions tend to lose half as many students in each subsequent year of enrollment as they do from the first to the second year after the first year” (p. 32). Noel and Levitz (1991) describe this phenomenon as the retention funnel, providing a visual for the trend for most attrition to occur in the first year and then decreasing with each subsequent academic year.

The high attrition rate of students during the freshman year has become a major concern of college administrators (Barefoot, 2000; Jaffee, 2007; Jaffee, Carle, & Paltoo, 2008). Even for students who are retained to the sophomore year, aspects of the freshman year impact future retention and academic success. Ishanti and DesJardins (2002-2003) found students were at higher risk of dropping out in the second year if their overall GPA was below a 2.0 at the end of the first academic year. Similarly, Nora et al., (2005) discovered first year GPA was positively related to six year college graduation rates. In addition, the researchers also found a positive relationship between overall retention and the ratio of credit hours completed in the first academic year. Freshman involvement has also been linked to retention beyond the first year. A study conducted

by Berger and Milem (1999) found that early involvement in the freshman year impacted future involvement as well as social integration, academic integration and institutional commitment. The researchers also concluded that early involvement with faculty increased positive perceptions of institutional support and institutional involvement.

Increased risk for attrition, as well as the implications of the freshman year on overall student success, has prompted the development of first-year programs to address freshman student needs (Barefoot, 2000; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984). Barefoot (2000) noted “over the past two decades literally thousands of first year programs have been created with increased retention rates as the primary, if not the sole desired outcome” (p. 13). Types of freshman programming that have become common include; first year seminar classes, freshman learning communities, resident life activities and service learning programs (Barefoot, 2000). Common objectives of these programs include: 1) increased student-to-student interaction; 2) increased faculty-to-student interaction; 3) increased student involvement and time on campus; 4) linked curriculum requirements with co-curricular activities; 5) increased levels academic engagement; and 6) assistance for students with insufficient academic preparation.

Barefoot (2000) noted:

Although first-year students themselves may not value or even recognize a coherent college education, advocates of experiential learning argue that linking what goes on in class with students’ out-of-class activities creates a synergy that potentially compounds student learning. Strategies such as first-year seminars, learning communities and living-learning programs in residence halls have been successful in achieving that coherence. (p.16)

Freshman seminar programs have become a common feature on college campuses. The first freshman seminar course was established at Reed College in 1911 (Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984). By 2000, approximately 70% of US

colleges and universities had instituted some sort of freshman seminar program (Barefoot, 2000). The growth continued and in 2008 freshman seminar programs could be found on almost every college campus (Jaffee et al., 2008). Barefoot concluded the relative ease of implementation made freshman seminar courses a popular first-year intervention strategy. Freshman seminar courses provide students with a more thorough introduction to college than one would receive through the general education curriculum and include topics related to adjustment, academic success and career planning (Gordon & Grites, 1984).

Research has supported the assertion that freshman seminar courses aid in student retention (Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984; Shanley & Witten, 1990; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003). Fidler and Hunter (1989) discovered that students who completed a freshman seminar course had higher sophomore retention rates than those who did not complete a freshman seminar course. Additionally, Shanley and Witten (1990) studied the impact of freshman seminar participation beyond the freshman year. The researchers found that successful completion of a freshman seminar course increased retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Schnell and Dockett (2002-2003) also looked at the implications of freshman seminar courses beyond the first year and found that students that participated in freshman seminar courses were retained at a higher rate each subsequent academic year than those who did not take the course.

Freshman Learning Communities

The growth in popularity of learning communities can be seen at many institutions across the United States. Jaffee et al., (2008) noted “First year student

learning communities have become an establish feature of the higher education landscape” (p. 53). MacGregor and Smith (2005) observed that the concept of learning communities on campus “is no longer an outlier concept on the fringe; it is a regular topic, having reached a level of recognition similar to other key movement such as service learning, classroom research and cooperative learning” (p. 2).

The definition of a learning community is not the same at each institution. Smith, MacGregoer, Matthew and Gabelnick (2004) defined learning communities as “a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (p. 20). Tinto (2000) also found that the most basic form of a learning community includes blocked student scheduling, which allows students to take several courses as a group. However, Tinto (2000) cautioned:

Learning communities do more than co-register students around a topic or theme; they change the manner in which student experience the curriculum and the way they are taught. Faculty reorganize their syllabi and their classrooms to promote shared collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classrooms. This form of classroom organization requires students to work together in some form of collaborative groups and to become active in, and indeed responsible for, the learning of both group and classroom peers. In this way, students are asked to hare not only the experience of the curriculum but also the experience of learning within the curriculum. (p. 2)

The general goal of the learning community movement is to advance the collective knowledge while supporting the growth of individual knowledge (Barefoot, 2000; Smith et al., 2004). Additionally, learning communities aspire to develop the capacity of the students to make both academic and social connections (Smith et al., 2004). The development and growth of a learning culture is the central theme of the learning community; establishing a culture in which everyone is involved in a collective

effort of learning and understanding. Bielaczyc and Collins (1983) identified four characteristics of a learning culture: a) diversity of expertise among its members; b) shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills; c) an emphasis on learning how to learn; and d) a mechanism for sharing what is learned.

While the purpose of learning communities at various institutions may be the same, the structure and appearance vary widely at each institution. Research on the various types of learning community styles has shown many positive implications for students, faculty and institutions. However, Smith et al. (2004) noted “individual learning communities rarely share the exact same structure or practices, yet they resemble one another in their attempts to make curricular connections and align practices across multiple courses “ (p. 69) The authors found the variations of learning communities to include: 1) learning communities within unmodified courses; 2) learning communities of linked or clustered classes; 3) team taught learning communities; and 4) living-learning communities.

Learning communities within unmodified courses involve students taking two or three stand- alone courses. Members of the learning community are enrolled in each of the stand -alone course; however, the courses are not modified by the faculty. Within this structure students often take an additional freshman seminar course related to the theme of the group, or attend a seminar that draws connections between the other academic courses the students are taking as a group When the linked or clustered class model is utilized student often take an introductory skill-building course, such as speech, computer applications or English composition, while also taking a content-heavy course related to the them of the learning community. Faculty teaching the linked classes collaborate to

provide an interrelated experience between the two courses. Within this model students may also enroll in a freshman seminar class which also focuses on the theme of the learning community. Team-taught learning communities are another common structure bringing together the several classes into one. The faculty members teaching the class adapt a common syllabus and develop assignments and projects to integrate the theme. Living-learning communities use one of the models listed above but also involve a learning component to the experience. With this model students take classes together while at the same time living in a common residence facility.

Smith et al., (2004) noted “Whatever curricular structure is chosen, what is most important is the fit between the learning community idea, the individuals who are likely to undertake the program, and the campus’s existing mission, culture and structures (p.93). Stassen (2003) concurred “the general student population can benefit significantly from even relatively limited and uncoordinated learning community efforts” (p. 607).

While the growth in popularity of learning communities can be seen over the last few decades, the history of learning community’s dates back to the 1920’s (Smith et al., 2004). The first work in the learning community movement can be attributed to John Dewey. For most of his career John Dewey was faculty member in the area of philosophy and taught at University of Michigan, University of Chicago and Teachers College of Columbia University from 1904-1939. Dewey focused much of his time and research on improving elementary and secondary education and stressed that students should be viewed as individuals. Additionally, he focused on the importance of engaging the learner in the learning process as well as on the role that schools play in building and developing citizenship skills, social control, and community life (Smith et al., 2004).

While most of Dewey's work was related to elementary and secondary education, Alexander Meiklejohn expanded on the concepts and applied them to the higher education setting. According to Smith et al., (2004) "Alexander Meiklejohn is a central figure in the learning community history for his insights into the fundamental importance of structure, curricular coherence and community" (p. 27). Meiklejohn's impressive career in higher education included the positions of Dean at Brown University, President of Amherst College and later Director for the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Smith et al., 2004). It was his work at the University of Wisconsin that brought the concept of learning communities to higher education.

The Experimental College operated from 1927-1932 and enrolled between 74 and 119 freshmen each year. The new college was designed as a living-learning community that developed around Meiklejohn's vision that the community would support rather than distract the students from their common intellectual work. The experimental college integrated curricular and co-curricular experiences with the goal to cultivate both the body and the mind of the students enrolled (Smith et al., 2004).

In 1931, due to declining enrollment and economic hardship, the Experimental College was closed (Smith et al., 2004). However, while the Experimental College only lasted five years, the experiment itself is seen by historians as a high point in the history of the University of Michigan (Smith, 2001).

The idea of the learning community was not lost with the end of the Experimental College in 1931. In the 1960's and 1970's the higher education system nearly doubled in size and colleges and universities again embraced innovative programs and sub-colleges that revised the curriculum as well as the structure and roles of faculty and students

(Smith et al., 2004). Examples of these programs include the residential college at Michigan and the Centennial Program at the University of Nebraska. However, very few of these programs survived, most had lost their niche as institutions changed their focus to topics such as student centered learning, independent study and writing across the curriculum (Smith, 2001).

At the same time that many of the programs of the 1960's and 1970's were ending, a movement was growing that directly impacted the growth of the learning communities seen today in education. In 1985 the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education was established at The Evergreen State College (Smith et al., 2004). The Washington Center re-energized the learning community movement by serving as a state and nationwide dissemination system for information regarding learning communities. The development of the Washington center as well as newly published research that demonstrated the effectiveness of learning communities helped the movement grow to the level of popularity that it is at today (Smith, 2001).

According to Smith et al. (2004) "the contemporary concept and implementation of learning communities started to build into a national movement in the mid-1980's with substantial expansion in the mid-1990's (p. 20). This growth and popularity has continued into the 21st century and has impacted student at in all types of higher institution settings. In 2001, between four and five hundred colleges and universities offered learning communities as part of their curriculum (Smith, 2001). In addition, learning communities could be found in every type of institution in the United States; including both two year and four years institutions as well as those with research, comprehensive, and liberal arts missions have found ways to incorporate this into some

portion of their curriculum (Barefoot, 2000; Smith, 2001) Advocates contend learning communities can be utilized at any academic level, however, research has shown them to be most valuable to first years students, providing a sense of belonging when they first enter the college or university (Barefoot, 2000).

Researchers have found that learning communities produce positive outcomes for students, faculty and the institution as a whole. Conroe (1986) noted that the living learning community model had a positive effect on retention as well as residence hall occupancy, both of which are concerns of academic administrators and institutional success. Barefoot (2000) attributed learning community participation to an enhanced development of community and increased collaboration between faculty and staff. Tinto (2000) studied learning community programs and found the following positive outcomes: 1) students in learning communities form self-supporting groups that extended beyond the classroom; 2) learning community students become more actively involved in classroom learning; 3) participating in a learning community enhanced the quality of student learning; and 4) learning community student saw themselves as more engaged both academically and socially.

Tinto (1996) found that learning community participants had higher self-reported first year satisfaction scores which lead to persistence beyond the first year. Blackhurst, Akey, and Bobilya (2003) studied the impact of a living-learning community on students at a mid-sized public institution and found that the experience contributed to the following: 1) ease of transition to college; 2) social integration; 3) development of personal relationships with faculty; 4) facilitate in-class learning; 5) created a living/learning environment; and 6) work against peer norms. Dodge and Kendall (2004)

studied learning community participation at a two year college attributed to the following student benefits: 1) discovering how concepts are linked to other classes; 2) the ability to work together to solve problems; 3) a reinforced sense of individual skills; 4) the opportunity to make friends; 5) the chance to learn how experts in the field coordinate across disciplines; 6) the ability to adapt to multiple faculty member perspectives; 7) the opportunity to arrange a convenient class schedule of linked courses; and 8) an increased chance to succeed in personal, academic and professional areas. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found that first year learning community participation contributed to students' personal development as well as sense of community. Several researchers have found that learning community participation increases academic performance (Barefoot, 2000; Johnson & Romanoff, 2008; Stassen, 2003), levels of persistence (Stassen, 2003) and ease of adjustment (Barefoot 2000; Blackhurst et al., 2003). Walker (2003) also attributed increased cognitive development with learning community participation. Barefoot (2000) noted "Once in the classroom, students reported feeling empowered by their out-of-class relationships to engage in behaviors that typically result in enhanced learning and improved academic performance" (p. 48). Additionally, Cross (1998) found learning community participation increased student and faculty interactions. When students have more contact with faculty both in and out of the classroom they are more satisfied with their academic experience, less likely to drop out and more likely to perceive themselves to have learned more than students with little faculty contact. Walker (2003) also concluded that positive outcomes of learning community participation are true for all types of students, not just those categorized as at risk.

While most research has found positive outcomes to learning community participation, negative outcomes have also been discovered, specifically related to the peer cohort. Barefoot (2000) found that while most students enjoyed the frequent contact with peers within the learning community, some students indicated feeling overwhelmed with the amount of interaction. Also problematic is that participation in a learning community may require behaviors that at times, are uncomfortable for some students. Often, the goals of the learning community conflict with personal goals of individualism and competitiveness (Barefoot, 2000). Additionally, Jaffee (2007) and Jaffee et al.,(2008) warned that the social-psychological dynamic within a freshman learning community can produce an environment much like that of a high school classroom Jaffe (2007) noted:

There are several unintended consequences of this structural arrangement. The very conditions of homogeneity and extended association that should promote community in a relatively small group of post-adolescent freshman aged students taking a cluster of classes together can also recreate a mutually reinforcing high school-like environment with the associated demands and bad behaviors characterized by excessive socialization, misconduct, disruptive behaviors and cliques. (p. 67)

Jaffee et al., (2008) concurred “Ironically, then, a structural arrangement designed to prepare and socialize students for the transition to college life may inadvertently create conditions that can retard the process” (p. 56). The researchers also found the peer norms established within the groups does not always related to academic engagement and student learning. Conflict may occur in the classroom if the group develops an attitude of collective opposition to faculty members and course work. However, Tinto (2000) cautioned that these issues should not deter institutions from utilizing the learning community concept. “Learning communities do not represent a “magic bullet” for

student learning. As with any other type of pedagogy, there are unavoidable limits to their effectiveness” (p. 12).

Sophomore Needs

The definition of sophomore students has presented many administrators with a challenge. Gahagan and Hunter (2006) noted that many students enter college with advanced credits which place them academically at the level of sophomore long before their second academic year. Also, students with academic difficulties or the need for remediation courses may take several academic years before reaching the status of “sophomore”. For this reason, the authors noted the issue is that of the second year of academic experience and not the status of sophomore that should be considered. Wilder (1993) looked at the differences between student that leave and those who are retained during the second academic year and found that dropouts were more likely to be involved in non-academic activities. Ishanti and DesJardins (2002-2003) found that the factors that affect student attrition change with each academic year. Tinto (1982) noted that once students progress beyond the initial transition to college they are most likely to dropout at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second academic year.

Because universities traditionally frontload resources and support for first year student they may fail to provide the support needed during the second year which brings challenges that extend beyond the initial transition to college (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Pattengale and Schriener (2000) noted that many second year students are facing the reality of college without the support that sustained them through the transition of the

first year. The researchers found that sophomores receive the least amount of attention of any classes. Bovin, Fountain and Baylis (2000) caution:

Unless consideration is given to sophomore year experience, successive cohorts of first year students will continue to weather the storm of the first year transition only to bail out of higher education when they face the serious developmental challenges which continue and even intensify into the sophomore year. (p. 11)

Similarly, Pattengale and Schreiner (2000) note “without providing ongoing services and support to sophomores, efforts seem to be only postponing the inevitable until the end of the sophomore year” (p. 7).

Lipka (2006) described second year students as the equivalent of academic middle children, and for many students, this is a time of uncertainty and disengagement from the college community. The US Department of Education reported that two-thirds as many students drop out during the second academic year as the first (Lipka, 2006). The reality of second year attrition has brought more attention to the concept of the sophomore or second year slump. The cost of second year attrition is high not only for the university but also the student that leaves. Pattengale and Schreiner (2000) noted the loss of time and money invested if a student leaves after two years versus during the first academic year. However, the authors also stipulate that the sophomore slump is about more than retention rates. Student may remain in school but still suffer from reduced motivation, declining GPA and feelings of dissatisfaction. Pattengale and Schreiner (2000) noted:

If the goal is to facilitate the learning process to equip students for a lifetime of learning, educators should be alarmed if sophomores are falling into a curricular and programmatic gap-often with memories of special first-year initiatives and knowledge of major classes enjoyed by their junior and senior colleagues. (p. 7)

The phrase sophomore slump was first used by Freedman (1956) to describe the observation that sophomores or second year students appeared to be the least satisfied of all students on campus. Since this first observation, researchers have elaborated on the phenomenon. Margolis (1976) indicated the sophomore slump is somewhat of an identity crisis for students encompassing the academic, social and personal self. Furr and Gannaway (1982) described the sophomore slump as a time of confusion and uncertainty that students encounter during their second academic year. Graunke and Woosley (2005) warned second year students may become distant from the university due to lack of connection to academic major, limited leadership opportunities and lack of attention from faculty and staff. Researchers have found that challenges faced in the second academic year are different than those students faced in the first academic year yet still significant to retention and student success (Bovin et al., 2000; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

Research into the phenomenon of the second year slump has provided insight into specific issues related to the crisis which include: a) lack of sense of purpose; b) uncertainty about major and/or career plans; c) dissatisfaction with experiences at the university and/or personal relationships; d) reduced motivation; and e) declining academic performance (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Schaller, 2010; Schreiner, 2007).

The critical issues that many students face center around developing a sense of meaning and finding a purpose in life as related to education, career, and life goals. Commitment to academic major is a key element in this transition. Many colleges and universities require students select a major during or near the end of their second

academic year. As students explore majors and ultimate career options they must evaluate their abilities to succeed in given areas of study (Schaller, 2000). Schaller noted:

The selection of the major is a complex process requiring students to have the academic ability for the specific coursework, awareness and understanding of available options, and decision-making skills particularly in balancing interties with future career or life goals. (p. 18)

Gardner (2000) found that second year students were more likely than other students to identify choosing a major as their main area of concern. Coburn and Treeger (2009), also note that sophomore students may find it difficult to concentrate on their studies if they are desperate to identify a major and ultimately a goal for being in college. A study by Graunke and Woosley (2008) found students with a declared major had higher GPAs than those that were undecided.

Guay et al.(2006) defined career indecision as a state where students are unable to make a decision about their career direction. Studies of student retention often categorized undecided students as attrition-prone (Foote; 1980; Groccia & Harrity, 1991; LeWallen, 1993). However, Cuseo (2005) cautioned against seeing all undecided students as at risk. “Students may be undecided for a variety of reasons, many of which are psychologically healthy, and which have nothing to do with absence of direction, lack of goal-orientation, or propensity for procrastination” (p. 28). Cuseo (2005) attributed some indecision to factors such as having diverse interests that causes students to consider multiple career areas as well as those that have a decision making style that requires more information be gathered before reaching a decision. Similarly, Guay, et al. (2006) maintained that all students identified as undecided about major should not be lumped into one category, but should instead be categorized as either developmentally unsure or chronically unsure. The authors noted those developmentally unsure students

simply need more information about themselves and the world of work before making a decision. However, for chronically unsure students more information may not be helpful due to the anxiety related to choosing a major. “Students characterized by developmental indecision should thus experience a decrease in career indecision over time as they gather information on themselves and the world of work, where as students who are chronically undecided should remain stably undecided over time” (Guay et al., 2006, p. 236).

The ability to decide a major is also related to the concepts of self-efficacy (Guay et al., 2006; Schaller, 2000) and identity development (Chickering, 1969; Coburn & Treeger, 2009). Bandura (1997) defined self efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required producing given attainments” (p. 3). He noted that perceived self-efficacy directly impacts career and occupational decisions:

Efficacy beliefs set the slate of options for serious consideration. People rapidly eliminate from consideration entire classes of vocations on the basis of perceived efficacy whatever benefit they might hold. Efficacy beliefs predict the range of career options people consider viable for themselves when variation in actual ability, poor level of academic achievement, and vocational interest are controlled. (p. 423)

Bandura (1978) also found that self-efficacy affects choice, effort, persistence and sense of accomplishment. Academic self-efficacy relates to a self-evaluation of ones ability and or chance of success in an academic environment (Chemers et al., 2001; Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley, & Carlstron, 2004) Freshman year seminar programs, which assist students in the transition to college have been credited with building student’s academic self-efficacy as well as study skills (Schaller, 2010). However, Schaller also noted that “academic self-efficacy may be of concern in the sophomore year for those students who have faced academic challenge in the first year, for those who

have not been selected into majors of their choice, or for those who decide to change academic focus areas from their college entry plans” (p. 18). Cairns et al., (1989) and Schunk (1987) found that identification with a peer group, such as a learning community, can raise the self-efficacy beliefs of the members within the group. Guay et al., (2006) found that developmentally undecided students experienced an increase in self-efficacy as they learned more about themselves and career options. Students that were chronically undecided did not experience gains in self-efficacy over time. The researchers also discovered students who are more decided in terms of career decision are more autonomous than chronically undecided students.

The selection of a major and a career path also relates to students sense of identity. Coburn and Treeger (2009) note that when a student selects a major, the student also forms an identity as well as an attachment with the academic department related to the major. However, undecided students often associate being undecided in regard to academic major with having no academic home or identity. Similarly, students who change majors may struggle with the change in identity, of no longer being identified as part of the academic group. Coburn and Teeger (2009) also warn that students with prestigious career plans (eg. pre med) may suffer a crisis of identity when they decide to change majors and pursue a different career path.

The realization of the importance of second year issues has led to research into ways to meet the needs of sophomore students and recommendations for colleges and universities to address these needs. Gardner, Pattengale, and Schriener (2000) noted “Academic, social and personal support, as well as opportunities for student involvement remain vital aspects of student retention throughout college and thus should be central to

the experiences of students in their second year” (p. 22). Acknowledging the development concerns as well as paying more attention to second year students is an important step in addressing the sophomore slump (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gardner et al., 2000). Gahagan and Hunter (2006) recommended ways to reach this goal including: the formation of a committee or taskforce for the purpose of identifying the needs of second year; creating programs specific to the needs of second year students; extending first year programs into the second year to encourage continued involvement and support; modifying existing programs so that they will engage sophomore students; and the creation of institutional traditions for second year students. Evenbeck and Hamilton (2010) encouraged universities to work to develop student learning for sophomore students. Recommendations to reach this goal: continuing to use engaging pedagogy; integration of experiential and service learning into second year classes; encouraging students to participate in study abroad and on-campus employment opportunities, providing mentors, and allowing student opportunities to serve in leadership roles.

Because career choices and selection of academic major concerns are an integral part of the sophomore slump, many researchers have developed recommendations involving academic advising and career counseling. Gordon (2000) identified key tasks for academic advisors to aid in this process and noted that advisors should encourage students to reflect on the previous year and identify skills that need to be addressed as the student takes advanced classes in the second year. Reflection on the previous year allows the opportunity for the advisor to refer students to resources on campus that can assist with problem areas. In addition, advisors should review the student’s academic progression in comparison with the standards set by the academic colleges, specifically

for students with aspirations to enter highly competitive programs in order to identify any problems with academic progression. Advisors can also use this time as a way to encourage sophomore to develop academic and career-related skills through co-curricular activities on the college campus. Gohn, Swartz and Donnelly (2000-2001) also note the importance of career workshops as well as the opportunity for all second year students to schedule at least one class within their academic major.

Theoretical Framework

Overview of Psychosocial Theoretical Foundation

Psychosocial development theories addresses issues of development related to the way individuals define themselves and their relationships (Evans, 2003). Development takes place through sequential stages, which are often linked to age. In each stage the individual faces issues or developmental tasks that must be resolved in order to move to the next stage (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Psychosocial theory is based on the work of Erickson (1959, 1968) who noted that within each stage internal psychological and biological changes interact with social demands to create a crisis. Successful resolution of the crisis allows the individual to progress to the next stage and develop new skills and attitude. However, if the crisis is not resolved, regression to previous stages may occur until the issue can be resolved (Evans et al., 1998). According to Erikson's theory, the issues that must be addressed, as well as the order in which the issues are encountered, are influenced by society, culture and gender (Evans et al., 1998). Successful resolution of developmental tasks and crises depends on the coping skills that have been developed in the process. The inability to resolve development tasks can lead to stress and the inability to address future developmental crises (Evans et al., 1989).

While Erikson's theory did not directly relate to the college environment, there are several theories that address issues related to psychosocial development during college. The Psychosocial theory used to frame this study is Chickering's Theory of Psychosocial Identity Development (1969).

Chickering's Theory of Psychosocial Identity Development

Chickering's theory includes seven vectors of development which build upon and interact with each other. Students progress through each vector at different rates and may also return to reexamine a previous stage (Chickering, 1969). These vectors describe the developmental progression of college students (Chickeing & Reisser, 1993). The vectors of this theory are:

Developing Competence

Managing Emotions

Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

Establishing Identity

Developing Purpose

Developing Integrity

The vectors of Developing Competence, Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence, Establishing Identity, and Developing Purpose have been identified as vectors that relate directly to aspects of the sophomore slump (Bovin et al., 2000; Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

Table 3

Overview of Chickering's Vectors of Identity Development

Vector	Developmental Tasks
Developing Competence	Development of Intellectual Competence Development of Physical/Manual Competence
Managing Emotions	Development of Interpersonal Competence Increased Awareness of Emotions Balance of Self-Control and Self-Expression
Moving through Autonomy Toward Interdependence	Increased Emotional Independence Increased Problem-Solving Abilities Recognition of the Importance of Interdependence with Others
Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships	Acceptance and Appreciation of Differences Development of the Capacity for Healthy Relationships
Establishing Identity	Comfort with Body and Appearance Comfort with Gender and Sexual Orientation Sense of one's Social and Cultural Heritage Concept of Self and Comfort with Lifestyle Secure Sense of Self in Light of Feedback from Others Self-acceptance and self-esteem Personal stability and integration
Developing Purpose	Development of Clear Vocational Goals Ability to Make Meaning Commitments to Personal Interest and Activities Establish strong interpersonal commitments
Developing Integrity	Development of a Personal Value System Acknowledgement and Respect of Beliefs of Others Congruence in Personal Values and Actions

Adapted from Chickering and Reisser (1993)

Developing Competence

Developing competence is a primary goal for college students. Widick, Parker, and Knefekamp (1978) noted that the college environment is a testing ground for students to assess competence in various intellectual abilities. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified three types of competencies related to this vector; intellectual competence, physical competence and interpersonal competence. Developing intellectual competence involves skills such as gaining intellectual and aesthetic sophistication as well as the ability to comprehend, analyze and synthesis information (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Physical and manual competence encompasses physical and athletic achievement as well as development of self discipline. Reisser (1995) also noted that involvement in activities to increase wellness and health are part of the progression through this vector. Interpersonal competence is achieved through advances in communication with others. However, it also includes more complex abilities such as aligning personal agendas with goals of a larger group (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Movement in this vector requires the development of skills related to teamwork, leadership and followership (Reisser, 1995).

Students who do not achieve competence or recognition in one of these areas are often left feeling ineffective and dissatisfied with the college experience (Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Bovin et al., (2000) noted:

Difficulty in gateway or entry level courses for the major, difficulties on the athletic field or in performance arena, difficulty in interpersonal relationships-all of these can precipitate a crisis of confidence that may come to a head during the sophomore year. (p. 12)

Generally, sophomore students aspire to reach competencies in areas that extend beyond those met during the freshman year. If unable, they may view themselves as

incompetent, thus contributing to the sophomore slump (Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Reisser (1995) stressed that the sense of competence is subjective and based on how students feel about their performance as well as the feedback given by faculty and peers.

Managing Emotions

Managing emotions involves not only the awareness of one's emotions but also an understanding of how to express the emotions in an appropriate way (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). "Students must learn to balance self-assertive tendencies, which involve some form of aggressiveness or defensiveness, with participatory tendencies, which involve transcending the boundaries of the individual self, identifying or bonding with another, or feeling part of a larger whole" (p. 47). Widick et al., (1978) noted that the inability to manage emotions is often reflected on campus with issues such as residence hall damage, roommate conflicts and chemical dependency issues.

Moving Through Autonomy to Interdependence

Learning to be self-sufficient, pursue self-chosen goals, and rely less on the opinions of others are key aspects of this vector. Progression through the developmental tasks involves moving first through emotional and instrumental independence to then reach and eventual acceptance of interdependence with others. Developing the ability to function without the need of reassurance, affection and/or approval are key components of developing emotional independence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For most college students the first step in developing autonomy is taken by going to college and establishing oneself free of parental rules. Widick et al., (1978) noted that students begin to look more to other groups and individuals as a point of reference for behavior including, peer groups, groups related to chosen profession, and then finally ones own

thoughts and values. “Without awareness of and trust in one’s abilities and feelings as a valid source of information emotional autonomy is impossible (p. 23). Similarly, Bovin et al., (2000) note that second year students will face a crisis of competence if unable to find support to replace parental support.

This vector also involves the ability to think independently and to move where needed without detailed directions “This dimension of growth is often described as the attainment of self-directedness and includes the ability to identify resource and get help from appropriate people and use systematic problem solving methods” (Widick et al., 1978, p. 23).

The final stage of this vector involves a deeper understanding that with autonomy comes the ability to develop healthy interdependence with those around them. Widick et al., (1978) stressed that the movement toward interdependence can only happen after developing autonomy. “The need to be independent and the longing for inclusion becomes better balanced. Interdependence means respecting the autonomy of others and looking for ways to give and take with an ever-expanding circle of friends” (Widick et al., 1978, p. 47).

Specific problem areas related to sophomore students include the development of emotional and instrumental independence. Emotional independence involves the student learning to function on his/her own without the reassurance or approval of parents or other authority figures. Instrumental independence involves the ability of the student to cope and care for himself, and many sophomore students are dealing with issues of becoming emotionally independent while still physically and/or financially dependent on parental support (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

Developing mature interpersonal relationships encompasses learning to appreciate differences and developing the capacity for intimacy. “The ability to develop mature relationships involves rebalancing these needs for autonomy and attachment- moving from distance to closeness in some cases and from intimacy to separation in others” (Widick et al., 1978, p. 145). Two main components of this vector include tolerance and appreciation of differences and the development of the capacity for intimacy. Individuals develop attitudes and skills that reflect empathy as well as relationships characterized by openness, autonomy and trust (Widick et al., 1978).

Establishing Identity

Identity development is central in each of Chickering's vectors of college student development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted “ Establishing identity certainly involves growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self –esteem” (p. 173). Additionally, Widick et al., (1978) noted that the development of identity is necessary for progression through the final stages related to purpose and integrity.

The establishment of identity encompasses several key components: 1) comfort with the physical self and appearance; 2) comfort with gender and sexual orientation; 3) sense of self in a social, cultural and history context; 4) clarification of self-concept through life roles; 5) understanding of feedback from others; 6) self-acceptance and self-esteem; and 7) personal stability and integration (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Additionally, Reisser (1995) noted, “colleges and universities provide a myriad of

opportunities for students to explore the different rooms in the house of the self and to understand how the interlocking parts-body, mind, feeling, beliefs, values and priorities- all constitute a coherent sense of self with a continuity of experience” (p. 509). Lemons and Richmond (1987) noted that the sophomore year may be a time when students face increased difficulties in identity development. Bovin et al., (2000) noted some difficulties of heightened concern to sophomores include: major or career choice; religious beliefs and values; political opinions; sexual standards; and gender roles and relationships. Park and Folkman (1997) found that the college years provide students with the opportunity to experiment with varied roles, learn about alternative to beliefs, and experience the opportunity to make decisions, experience meaningful achievement, break free from excessive anxiety and have time to for reflection and introspection.

Developing Purpose

Developing purpose include the ability to act with intention, assess interests, clarify goals, make plans, and persist despite obstacles that may present themselves (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This vector involves the individual searching for direction and making commitments (Bovin et al., 2000; Widick et al., 1978). Assessment and clarification of interests, educational and career options as well as lifestyle choices are elements of this vector. However, simply making a choice related to major and career does mean that the individual has developed purpose and that making the choice without the assessment can lead to stumbling blocks for students. Difficulty within this area for sophomore students often revolves around choosing a major and making career commitments and decision (Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

Developing Integrity

Chickering and Reisser (1993) identify three stages related to the development of integrity which include: 1) humanizing values; 2) personalizing values; and 3) developing congruence. “Movement toward integrity means not only increased congruence between behavior and values but also movement toward responsibility for self and other and the consistent ability to thoughtfully apply ethical principles” (p. 236). They noted that humanizing values involve moving from a right versus wrong type of thinking toward the ability to look at situations individually and revise previous viewpoints. Personalizing values involves affirming ones own beliefs while respecting the beliefs of others. And developing congruence involves aligning one’s behavior with the personal values.

History of Living-Learning Communities at the Research Institution

Learning communities first appeared at Auburn University in 1973 to provide engineering students with academic and social support. The first learning community was a living-learning model that existed until the residence facility was torn down. The concept of an Engineering living-learning community was revived in the mid 1980’s and again sustained until the residence facility was again removed.

In 1998, pilot learning communities were reintroduced as part of freshman retention efforts. There were two groups in the original pilot program, one for students in the College of Liberal Arts and the other for the College of Business. Shortly after, the College of Agriculture added a learning community. The learning community movement soon grew to include programs for human sciences, forestry and nursing students. In 2006-2007 learning communities were fully reintroduced at this institution. The program has seen a growth in participation over the last 5 years. In 2005 there were 150 students

participating in learning communities and by 2009 there were 765 students. The options for groups also grew from 6 cohorts to 32 during the 2005-2009 time spans.

The goals of the learning communities include aiding in: 1) successful academic transition from high school to college; 2) successful social transition from high school to college; 3) appreciation for diversity within the university community and beyond; and 4) effective communication skills. Learning communities consist of groups of 25 freshmen who share a common interest in an academic area or a general topic. During the 2009-2010 academic year there were 22 learning community options available to freshman students. Sixteen of the learning communities related to a major or area of study. These options included: 1) Agriculture; 2) Agriculture- Pre-Vet; 3) Architecture, Design, and Construction- Longview: Exploring environmental longevity in construction and design; 4) Architecture, Design and Construction-Greenhouse: Green practices in construction and design; 5) Business; 6) Conservation Biology; 7) Education; 8) Engineering; 9) Forestry and Wildlife; 10) Human Sciences; 11) Liberal Arts; 12) Liberal Arts and the Public Good; 13) Marine Biology; 14) Microbiology; 15) Nursing; and 16) Women in Engineering.

The general interest options included: 1) AU Gives Back; 2) Earthsmart; 3) Fighting Against Hunger; 4) Franklin Society; 5) Healthy Living; and 6) The Provost Leadership Undergraduate Scholarship (PLUS) learning community. Both the Engineering and the Women in engineering learning communities were designated as living-learning communities where members were required to reside in the same housing facility. While specific housing was not required for the other learning communities, each

had a designated residence area where members could chose to live in close proximity to other learning community members.

Summary

Reviewing a wide variety of research has shown the significance of student retention and graduation rates for institutions and students. While student attrition is found to be highest during the first year, it is also reality in the proceeding years. Much attention and effort has been given to students during the first year , however, less has been found to help students through the developmental challenges of the sophomore year. In addition, there has been little research on the impact of learning community participation on the developmental tasks of the sophomore year.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact freshman year learning community participation has on students' self reported sense of meaning in life, academic self efficacy, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of their sophomore year. The study was conducted at a doctoral degree-granting research university in the South East United States. Two groups of students were administered portions of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schreiner, 2010) at the beginning of their sophomore year to assess sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy, and commitment to academic major. The treatment group consisted of students who participated in learning communities during the 2009-2010 academic year. The control group consisted of students who did not participate in learning communities during the 2009-2010 academic year, but independently completed either a one or two credit hour freshman seminar course.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher academic self-efficacy scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

2. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher sense of meaning in life scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?
3. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have a higher commitment to major score than the students who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Overview of Research Design

The researcher conducted a causal-comparative research study. Causal-comparative research attempts to determine the reasons or causes for a condition that already exists (Gay & Airasian, 1987). Causal comparative research, also known as ex post facto research, differs from experimental research in that the independent variable is not controlled by the researcher as it is in experimental research. Instead, both the experimental and control groups existed before the research began and the differences between the groups is not determined by the researcher (Gay & Airasian, 1987). This study merits a causal-comparative design because it involves two pre-formed groups, a learning community and non-learning community group, and compares them on dependent variables which include sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to major.

Limitations to this design relate to control, as well as interpretation of results. With a causal-comparative design the same types of controls cannot be employed as in

experimental research because the independent variable occurred before the research began. In addition, with the results, one cannot draw a causal connection but only determine the presence of a statistical relationship. However, a benefit of the causal-comparative design is that it allows for the investigation of variables that cannot be investigated or manipulated experimentally (Gay & Airasian, 1987).

Independent Treatment Variable

The independent variable in this study was participation in a freshman learning community. The learning community curriculum model includes all students in at least one university success course and two other common classes. The dependent variables were self-reported scores of: a) sense of meaning in life; b) academic self-efficacy; and c) commitment to college major. Researchers have found that the completion of a freshman seminar course, independent of the learning community component, increased retention, persistence, and graduation rates for the student completing the course during the freshman year (Gordon & Grites, 1984; Shanley & Witten, 1990; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003). To control for the impact of university success classes on the dependent variables, the control group consisted of freshman students that took at least one university success course independently from a learning community.

Participants

Sample Size and Composition

Participants were freshman during the 2009-2010 academic year at a doctoral-level degree granting institution in the southeast United States. Information in regards to the general student population was obtained from the New Student Fact Book 2010 which was compiled by the Auburn University Office of Institutional Research and

Assessment. The general student population for the institution during the 2009-2010 academic year consisted of 24,602 students. Of the 24,602 in students in the sample 5,146 students (20.9% of the student population) were classified as freshmen (students with less than 30 credit hours). The undergraduate population consisted of 12,449 males (50.6% of the student population) and 12,153 females (49.4% of the student population). The ethnicity of the undergraduate study body consisted of; Caucasian 86%, African American, 7.6%, Hispanic 2.1%, Asian 1.9%, Non-Resident Alien 06% and unreported 1.1% (Auburn University, 2010).

During the 2009-2010 academic year there were 5,255 freshman students with an average age of 18.10 years. The entrance exams for this freshman class had an average ACT score of 26.2 and an average SAT score of 1183. In addition, the average high school GPA was 3.69. The demographics for the first time freshman class were: Caucasian 85.96%; African American 6.87%; Hispanic 2.42%; Asian 2.14%; Unreported 1.40%; Native American 0.74%; and Non-resident Alien 0.46%.

The population of student that participated in learning communities during the 2009-2010 school year consists of 608 ($N=608$) freshman students. The control group included 1058 ($N=1058$) students that were freshman during the 2009-2010 academic year. Members of the control group did not participate in a Learning Community but enrolled independently in a freshman seminar course.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, there were 34 one credit hour university experience courses and 27 one hour university study skills courses offered outside of the learning community curriculum. Within the learning community curriculum there were seven one credit hour university experience courses, 17 one credit hour university study

skills courses and 15 two credit hour university freshman seminar courses offered during the 2009-2010 academic year. The enrollment within these courses consisted of university experience 737 non-learning community students and 141 learning community students, university study skills 637 non-learning community students and 428 learning community students, university freshman seminar zero learning non-learning community students and 360 learning community students.

Instrumentation

The author of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (2007) granted permission to use portions of the instrument in this study (Appendix B). The instrument in its entirety assesses aspects of sophomore success: engaged learning; fixed/ growth mindset; academic self-efficacy; meaning in life; hope; demographics; and other sophomore experience items. The author of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schriener, 2007) combined the following existing instruments within the sophomore success survey: Engaged Learning Index; Academic Self-Efficacy Scale; Hope Scale; and the Meaning of Life Questionnaire. The sophomore experience items include questions related to level of participation in campus organizations and events, frequency of and satisfaction with interaction with faculty, satisfaction with peers; student involvement in leadership; peer mentoring; service-learning courses and learning community involvement; overall satisfaction with the college experience; satisfaction with amount they were learning; and satisfaction with advising (Appendix C).

Reliability

The Sophomore Experiences Survey has a coefficient alpha reliability of .90. Reliability for the individual components is reported as: Engaged Learning Index = .88;

Academic Self-Efficacy Scale = .88; Hope Scale = .88; the Meaning in Life Questionnaire = .72; and the faculty interaction scale = .80 (Schriener, 2010).

For the purpose of this study the instrument was adapted to include sections related to the sense of meaning in life, academic self efficacy and commitment to academic major. The academic self-efficacy component contained eight questions using a seven point Likert scale that range from 1 (Very Untrue of Me) to 7 (Very True of Me). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire included ten items answered on an eight point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Definitely False) to 8 (Definitely True). The commitment to academic major component consisted of the question “How sure are you of your major” with the options of very unsure, somewhat unsure, somewhat sure and very sure as responses (Appendix D).

In addition, the instrument included questions related to the freshman seminar course completed during the 2009-2010 academic year as well as place of residence during the summer of 2010. Options for the residence question included: 1) permanent residence; 2) university on-campus housing; 3) off – campus housing in the university community; or 4) other, with an option to explain.

Students also had the opportunity to provide qualitative data in the form of an open-ended question. The open-ended question asked students to describe their academic experiences during the first year at the institution.

Table 4

Conceptual Framework

Related Research Question	Related <i>Adapted Sophomore Experience Items</i>	Chickering's Theory of Identity Development-Related Vectors
Academic Self-Efficacy between the Learning Community Group and the Freshman Seminar Group	Questions 1-8	Developing Competence Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence
Sense of Meaning in Life Scores between the Learning Community and Freshman Seminar Group	Questions 9-17	Developing Purpose
Commitment to Academic Major	Question 18	Developing Identity Developing Purpose

Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the fall 2010 semester via portions of the Sophomore Experience Survey (Schreiner, 2007). An email list serve was provided by the university registrar's office with permission to access email address for students enrolled in learning communities during 2009-2010 academic year as well as those enrolled in university courses independently during 2009-2010 academic year. Students were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for this study (Appendix E).

The email sent to the students in both the learning community and university course groups explained that participation was voluntary (Appendix A). By clicking on the link to the survey, students indicated willingness to participate in the survey. Responses to the survey questions were collected using online survey software

(SurveyMonkey.com, 2010). Only the researcher and two committee members had access to the results.

Survey responses were invited from 1,666 participants, which included 608 students that participated in learning communities and 1058 students that independently completed a Freshman Seminar course. A total of 98 students (5.8%) participated in the study. Fifty-six students from the learning community group (9.2%) and 42 students (3.0%) from the University student success control group completed the quantitative portion of the survey. Responses for the open-ended question were obtained from 49 students (87.9%) in the learning community group and 37 (88%) from the control group.

Responses were collected via online survey software. The data was encrypted to ensure the security of participant responses. All data was compiled in real-time in an online, password protected site. Data will be stored in the passworded-protected reporting site for approximately one year after completion of data collection. After one year, the data will be purged.

The use of online survey software allowed participants the ability to complete the survey at their convenience and at a location of their choice. Solomon (2001) noted that email and web-based surveying is now common in social science and educational research. Parker (1992) found that the ability to complete a survey at any time as well as the ease of delivery provided email surveys an advantage over more traditional email and phone surveys. Additionally, Schaefer and Dillman (1998) noted that email surveys also provide a more cost effective way to conduct research due to the elimination of postage, printing and interview costs. However, they also noted that email and web based surveys may tend to have lower response rates than mail or telephone surveys. Cook, Heath and

Thompson (2000) found that the representativeness of the sample is the concern and not the response rate. “If, by employing new methods of electronic survey research, very large or representative numbers of a population can be reached, then concerns with regard to response rate and response bias could be placed in a new context”(p.823).

Additionally, Cooper, Cooper, Del Junco, Shipp, Whitworth and Cooper (2006) found web based data collection to be both efficient and effective. Schaefer and Dillman (1998) found this to be true especially when administered to a large sample.

Data Collection Procedures

The timeline for data collection procedures was as follows:

- Submitted IRB form- Summer 2010
- Obtained list of students in each group -Summer 2010
- Sent an email inviting students in both groups (LC and non-LC) to participate in the study – September 7, 2010
- Sent follow-up email to non-responders on September 20, 2010
- Data analysis will began on October 4, 2010

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for windows release 17.0 (SPSS, 2008). Because of the design employed, an independent samples t- test was performed on each scale. A t-test for independent samples was used to determine the probable significant difference between the mean scores of two samples that are independent of each other (Gay & Arasian, 1987).

Independent groups are those that have no relationship to each other and are not linked (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative comments from students participating in the survey were also collected. Content analysis was performed on the qualitative student responses (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). Pattern-coded responses were categorized into themes for later discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to address three primary research hypotheses. The sample of this study was 98 participants. Sophomores participants completed the adapted version of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schriener, 2007) during the Fall semester of 2010 via an online survey that also included sense of meaning in life questions, academic self- efficacy questions, a question regarding commitment to academic major, questions regarding residence during the summer of 2010 and specifics on the university success class completed. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question to describe first academic year at the institution. Survey responses were analyzed using independent t-tests. In addition, content analysis was performed on qualitative statements.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the difference between learning community and freshman seminar students' self-reported scores on sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy, and commitment to academic major during the year first semester of their sophomore year. The study compared differences in student scores collected via online survey software (SPSS). The data collected was analyzed using multiple independent samples t-tests. The study was guided by three primary research hypotheses.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher academic self-efficacy scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?
2. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher sense of meaning in life scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

3. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have a higher commitment to major score than the students who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 98 undergraduate students beginning their second academic semester at a large research university in the southeast United States. Fifty-six participants comprised the treatment group: students who participated in learning communities during their first academic year. Forty-two participants made up the control group: students who completed a freshman seminar class during their first academic year. All participants completed the quantitative portion of the survey. In addition, responses for the open-ended question were obtained from 49 students (87.9%) in the learning community group and 37 (88%) from the control group.

Research Question One

At the beginning of the sophomore year, will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher academic self-efficacy scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Table 5

Results of Independent sample t-test for Total self-efficacy Score

Learning Community Participants		Freshman Seminar Participants		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
43.41	7.23	43	7.19	96	.566	.573

Independent samples t- tests were conducted on responses from 98 respondents to all seven items from the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (see Appendix C). The results of the independent samples t- test did not find a significant difference in the scores for the learning community participants ($M = 43.41$, $SD = 7.23$), and the freshman seminar participants ($M = 43$, $SD = 7.19$), $t(96) = .566$, $p = .573$. These results suggest there was no difference in overall self-efficacy between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants.

Table 6

Total Self Efficacy for Learning Community Students Based on Commitment to Academic Major

Very Sure		Somewhat to unsure		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
46.29	6.43	40.54	6.93	54	-3.21	0.002

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the self-efficacy scores of learning community students based on commitment to academic major. There was a significant difference for learning community students who self-identified as very sure of

academic major ($M=46.29$, $SD= 6.43$) and learning community students that self-identified as somewhat sure to unsure of academic major ($M=40.54$, $SD=6.93$); $t(54)=3.21, p=0.002$. Results suggest that learning community students with very high commitment to academic major have higher overall self-efficacy scores than learning community students who self-identified as somewhat to unsure of academic major.

Table 7

Total Self-Efficacy score by Commitment to Academic Major for both groups

Very Sure		Somewhat to unsure		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
44.39	7.07	42.21	.99	96	-1.51	.135

However, when participants in both groups were compared based on commitment to major (somewhat sure to unsure versus very sure), there was no significant difference in the total sense of academic self-efficacy between the groups. The results of the independent samples t-test showed no significant difference, $t(96)= -1.51, p=.135$ between the scores of students that identified as being very sure of academic major ($M=44.39, SD=7.07$) and those that identified as somewhat sure to unsure ($M=42.21, SD .99$). This suggests that commitment to academic major does not have a significant effect on academic self-efficacy when both groups are combined.

Research Question 2

At the beginning of the sophomore year, will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher sense of meaning in life scores than the control

group who did not participate in a learning community but did participate in freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Table 8

Total sense of Meaning in Life Scores for both groups

Learning Community Participation		Freshman Seminar Participation		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
52.21	10.08	50.98	11.52	96	.566	.573

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare overall sense of meaning in life scores for both groups. There was no significant difference in the scores for learning community participants ($M=52.21$, $SD=10.08$) and freshman seminar participants ($M=50.98$, $SD=11.52$) ; $t(96)=.566$, $p=.573$.

Table 9

Results of t-test for “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful”

Learning Community Participants		Freshman Seminar Participants		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
6.50	1.388	5.86	1.458	96	2.220	.029

There was a significant difference, $t(96)=2.20$, $p = .029$, in the scores for learning community participants ($M=6.50$, $SD=1.38$) and the freshman seminar participants ($M=5.86$, $SD=1.45$) for question 13 of the Adapted Sophomore Success survey. These results suggest there is a difference between the learning community group

and the control group for this individual question “I have a good sense of what makes life meaningful.”

Table 10

Sense of Meaning in Life based on Commitment to Major

Very Sure		Somewhat to Unsure		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
54.52	8.52	42.21	11.80	96	-2.54	.013

Additionally, when participants in both groups were compared based on commitment to major (somewhat sure to unsure versus very sure), there was a significant difference; $t(96) = -2.54, p = .013$, in the total sense of meaning in life between the groups. The results of the independent samples t-test showed a significant difference between the scores of students that self-identified as being very sure of academic major ($M = 54.52, SD = 5.824$) and those who self-identified as somewhat sure to unsure ($M = 49.17, SD = 11.802$). This suggests that commitment to academic major has a significant effect on sense of meaning in life for both groups.

Table 11

Learning Community Participants Total Sense of Meaning in Life by commitment to academic major

Very Sure		Somewhat to Unsure		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
55.96	8.25	40.54	10.48	54	-2.98	0.004

Additionally, when looking at the learning community group and level of commitment to major, participants who self-identified as having a very high commitment to academic major had significantly higher total sense of meaning in life scores $t(54) = -298, p.004$, than those who identified as somewhat sure to unsure. Results of the t-test showed that those with a very high commitment to major ($M=55.96, SD=8.248$) and those that were only somewhat sure to unsure of academic major ($M=48.46, SD=10.479$). These results imply a significant difference in sense of meaning in life for learning community participants who self-identify as very sure of academic major.

Research Question 3

At the beginning of the sophomore year, there will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have a higher commitment to major score than the students who did not participate in a learning community, but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Table 12

Commitment to Academic Major

Learning Community Participants		Freshman Seminar Participants		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
3.36	.773	3.29	.742	96	.461	.379

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare commitment to academic major for learning community participants and freshman seminar participants. There was no significant difference in the scores for learning community participants ($M=3.36, SD=.773$) and freshman seminar participants ($M=3.29, SD=.742$) conditions; $t(96), p=.379$.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative comments from students participating in the survey were also collected. Content analysis was performed on the qualitative student responses (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). Pattern-coded responses were categorized into themes for later discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Results were reviewed and verified by faculty chair (Groccia, 2010).

Table 13

Qualitative Components and Evaluative Statements

Component	Evaluative Statement
Preparedness:	<p style="text-align: center;">For Both Groups:</p> <p>Expressed varying degrees of how prepared they were by their high school experience.</p> <p>Noted lack of time management and study skills.</p>
Skills Developed During Freshman Year:	<p style="text-align: center;">For Both Groups:</p> <p>Developed skills including discipline, time management and study skills.</p>
Academic Challenge:	<p style="text-align: center;">For Both Groups:</p> <p>Most participants indicated some degree of academic challenge.</p>
Adjustment:	<p style="text-align: center;">For Both Groups:</p> <p>Indicated varying levels of adjustment needed.</p> <p>Adjustment focused on academics as well as social. Identified areas for growth including; developing competence and autonomy</p>
Faculty Interactions:	<p style="text-align: center;">For Freshman Seminar Group:</p> <p>The group did not mention interacting with faculty</p>

	<p>For Learning Community Group: Positive interactions with faculty Important resources for success</p>
Impact of Freshman Seminar/Learning Community Participation	<p>For Freshman Seminar Group: Majority of students indicate they did not feel student success courses aided in their success</p> <p>Indicated Learning community participation may have been beneficial.</p> <p>For Learning Community Group: Learning community experience aided students in skill development, social connections and choosing a major.</p> <p>Indicated that Freshman Seminar classes were useful in skill development such as time management and study skills.</p>
Self-Evaluation of First Year/Success:	<p>For Both Groups: Majority of students indicated a level of success satisfactory to them.</p> <p>Challenges from lack of preparedness, motivation and failure to use university resources impacted grades.</p>
Motivation:	<p>For Both Groups: Indicated difficulty in motivation which impacted grades.</p>
Impact on Sophomore Year:	<p>For Freshman Seminar Group: Indicated more direction toward major.</p> <p>Most students indicated more academic success during second year.</p> <p>For Learning Community Group: Students reported doing better academically.</p> <p>Higher level of confidence and personal responsibility.</p> <p>Development of peer relationships and peer support.</p>

Peer Relationships: For Freshman Seminar Group:
Desire for social connections.

For Learning Community Students:
Developed friendships through the learning community.
Peer relationships useful in studying.

Institutional Affiliation/Commitment: For Student Success Group:
Students did not mention institutional affiliation.

For Learning Community Students:
Importance of school tradition and family atmosphere.

Satisfaction For Both Groups:
Indicated general satisfaction with the first year experience.

Additionally, participant comments were coded in relation to Chickering's seven vectors of student development. Comments related to the sophomore slump vectors (Lemons & Richmond, 1987) are summarized below:

Table 14

Qualitative statements related to Sophomore Slump (Lemons & Richmond, 1987)

Vectors Related to Sophomore Development	Evaluative Statements
Developing Competence	For Freshman Students: Developed self-discipline during first year Saw grades improve during first year Developed study and time management skills
	For Learning Community Students: Gained recognition for academic achievement

	Academically success as a sophomore
	Increased Confidence
	Developed study and time management skills
Moving from Autonomy to Interdependence	For Freshman Seminar Students: No statements
	For Learning Community Students: Commitment to personal health
	Learned importance of communication with faculty to individual success
Developing Identity	For Freshman Seminar Students: Developed sense of identity during freshman year
	For Learning Community Students: No statements
Developing Purpose	For Freshman Seminar Students: Enjoying classes and material learned
	Academic success after deciding major
	Searching for purpose as a sophomore
	For Learning Community Students: Satisfaction with classes related to academic major

Summary

A number of independent samples t-tests were conducted to look for differences between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants in regard to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major. The analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the two

groups for each of the measures. However, analysis showed that learning community participants that identified as very sure of academic major had significantly higher academic self-efficacy scores than learning community students that did not indicate being very sure of academic major. In addition, an analysis was conducted on individual questions and found that learning community participants had significantly higher scores for “I know what makes my life meaningful”. Also, participants in both groups had significantly higher sense of meaning in life scores when they self identified as being very sure of academic major. However, there was no significant difference in commitment to major between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact freshman year learning community participation has on students' self reported sense of meaning in life, academic self efficacy, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of their sophomore year. The conceptual framework for this study is Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1969).

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher academic self-efficacy scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?
2. At the beginning of the sophomore year will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have higher sense of meaning in life scores than the control group who did not participate in a learning community but did participate in a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?
3. At the beginning of the sophomore year there will students who participated in a freshman year learning community have a higher commitment to major score than

the students who did not participate in a learning community but did complete a freshman seminar course independently during the same academic year?

Study Synopsis

The population of this study consisted of undergraduate college students at a large, public four-year research institution in the southeast United States. The participants were in the first semester of their second academic year at the institution. Participants were selected based on participation in a learning community or freshman seminar course during their first academic year at the institution. Because the participants were not randomly selected the nature of the experiment was causal-comparative.

Since the review of literature showed a gap in the knowledge of the impact of first year learning community participation and second year scores related to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life and commitment to academic major, the objective of the research project was to investigate such impact. The survey used included portions of the Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schriener, 2007) and permission was granted by the researcher and author.

Data were collected and analyzed during the fall semester of 2010. The researcher obtained approval from the academic department that coordinates both learning community programs and freshman seminar classes to contact students for each group. Upon receiving permission to gather data, the researcher emailed participants from both groups inviting them to participate in the study. The email included an online link that directed the student to informed consent documents, the survey, and mental health resources. Upon completion of online instrument, participants had the opportunity

to enter a drawing for an iPod Touch. Overall, 98 participants took part in the study. The learning community group consisted of 56 participants and the freshman seminar group consisted of 42 participants. In addition, participants had the option to answer one open ended question asking that they describe their first-year academic experience.

Independent sample t-test were used to determine differences in scores related to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major. The study's findings were drawn from data that was analyzed as it related to the three primary research questions. In addition, qualitative theme coding was used to analyze qualitative statements in relation to general themes and the theoretical framework of the study.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The first analysis was conducted to find if there was a difference between overall self-efficacy scores between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants. Previous research has shown that learning communities serve to foster the development of an established peer group (Barefoot, 2000; Smith et al., 2004; Tinto, 2000). Schunk (1987) noted peer group affiliation has been linked to higher self efficacy scores. Independent samples t-tests found no significant difference between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants. These results indicate that development of the peer group within the learning community alone did not raise academic self- efficacy above that found in students who participated in a freshman seminar group.

However, when self-efficacy was analyzed based on level of commitment to major, learning community participants who self-identified as being very committed to academic major had significantly higher overall academic self-efficacy scores than learning community participants who self-identified as somewhat sure to unsure of academic major. This supports the assertion that career certainty increases academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bores-Rangel et al., 1990; Guay et al., 2006; Schaller, 2010). This finding is even more significant because when academic self-efficacy was assessed for all participants based on commitment to academic major, regardless of group, the results were not significant. This finding suggests that commitment to academic major has a greater effect on academic self-efficacy for learning community participants than for freshman seminar students.

The second area investigated related to sense of meaning in life. Woodard et al., (2001) noted that this was an area of concern related to sophomore attrition. The concept of sense of meaning in life relates to the development of purpose, goal direction and commitment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Klinger, 1977; Ryff & Singer, 1998). The analysis of sense of meaning in life scores for learning community participants and freshman seminar students failed to show a significant difference between the scores of the two groups. However, when the individual questions related to sense of meaning in life were analyzed there was a significant difference between participants in the learning community group and the freshman seminar group for the question “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful”.

Additional analysis of the sense of meaning in life scores related to commitment to academic major found when participants in either group self-identified as being very

sure of academic major they had significantly higher sense of meaning in life scores than those that were somewhat sure to unsure of academic major. This supports previous research connecting commitment to academic major to sense of meaning in life. However, the results also indicate that learning community participation did not directly lead to this result.

The analysis of commitment to academic major found that there was no significant difference between the learning community participants and the freshman seminar participants. These results indicate that participation in a learning community did not lead to a higher commitment to academic major than did freshman seminar participation.

Qualitative Findings

As a result of the qualitative question described above, the researcher identified 12 general themes related to participants' first year experiences. The themes are identified and described below in relationship to related literature. In addition, each section includes related quotations from the study participants. Statements were also categorized as they relate to the theoretical framework of the study.

General Themes

Academic Preparedness

Literature on student retention has shown academic preparedness to be a contributing factor to student attrition. Astin (1975) noted that high school performance is a major predictor of college attrition. Measures of high school performance used in retention studies include high school GPA, rank in high school class and ability as measured by college entrance exams. All participants in this study met the basic

admissions requirements for the institution, indicating similar levels of high school performance. However, participants in both the learning community group and the freshman seminar group indicated varying degrees of preparedness. Astin noted that individual differences in high schools may impact to student retention. Individual differences in the high schools may attribute to varying degrees of preparedness for students with similar pre-college entrance achievements. However, no information was gathered regarding type or size of high school attended. Participants in both groups made statements regarding varying levels of academic preparation. Similarly, students that indicated lack of preparedness upon entering college noted deficiencies in study and time management skills.

“During my first year, my high school prepared me for the academic challenge”

“I felt very prepared for the courses that I took based on the academic challenges I faced in high school”

“My high school prepared me effectively to deal with the transition”

“Set of skills not up to par for research institution”

“I was unaware of how much work and effort I was required to put in order to receive substantial grades”

“I always took honors and AP classes in high school...but it does not compare to college”

“ I wish I had known how to study better before my freshman year because if I'd know how to manage my time better grades would have been 4.0's”

“It was tough getting used to the pace that university classes go at”

Skills Developed During the First Year

A lack of time management and study skills upon entering college was a consistent theme for learning community and freshman seminar participants. However, participants in both groups indicated growth in these areas as a result of the first academic year. Additionally, several participants noted obvious differences in the skill areas between the first and second semester. Previous research has shown that freshman programming, including freshman seminar classes and freshman learning communities, assists students in the development skills related to insufficient academic preparation (Barefoot, 2000; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984). However, the findings failed to show a difference between the learning community and the freshman seminar participants.

“I tried to apply a lot of little tips I learned for studying and I tailored tips for doing well to finding my needs”

“I had to relearn what helped me learn and all the little strategies that worked for me”

“During the spring semester, I was much more disciplined, and I could manage my time to my best advantage”

“Since then I have learned better ways to study for tests and how to become more organized”

Academic Challenge

Students in both groups indicated varying degrees of academic challenge during the first academic year. These results are indicative of the varying degree of pre-college preparation found in statements from participants in both groups.

“My classes were a lot easier than my senior year of high school. I did not find my classes hard”

“Very easy, but interesting”

“Like expected, it was a big step up from high school. I was the type of student in high school that could get away without studying for a test. However, I always study for tests and quizzes since coming to Auburn”

“The academics were rigorous yet expanding. Thrusting me into a mass of knowledge and giving me the opportunity to soak it in like a sponge”

However, participants in the learning community group made reference to experiences with core curriculum while freshman seminar students did not reference experience within the core curriculum. The statements are in direct opposition to research by Dodge and Kendall (2004) who found learning community participation enabled students to make connections between courses in the core and major curriculum. Additionally, Anderson and Schreiner (2000) warned that students’ inability to see the connection between course work and ultimate goals was a concern for sophomore students. This implies that all of the learning community participants did not develop an integrated understanding of the college curriculum as it relates to their individual goals.

“Core classes (i.e. art) are useless towards my education. They only succeed in frustrating me”

“Core classes make me want to quit”

Adjustment to College

Participants in both groups indicated varying ease of adjustment to the college environment. Common themes included: adjusting to the academic environment; developing independence; and balancing extracurricular activities. The Participant statements are consistent with previous research which found freshman seminar program

(Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984; Shanley & Witten, 1990; Schnell & Dockett, 2002-2003) and learning community participation (Barefoot, 2000; Conroe, 1986; Smith, 2001; Tinto, 2000) aids in freshman year adjustment and retention to the sophomore year.

“Did not have much difficulty adjusting”

“It has been wonderful, just adjusting to new freedoms of life”

“It was a difficult transition from high school, but after time it started getting better”

“Nice transition from high school”

“My freshman year can be characterized by adaptation. I struggled with transitioning from high school style classes to college classes”

“The year moved by really quickly. At first it took time to adjust to the freedom and the way classes went about. After realizing how long studying actually means, I was just fine”

“I struggled, being a marching band member, with the multitasking of such an endeavor with the hardships of school”

Faculty Interactions

A review of literature supported the assertion that faculty interactions have a positive impact on student retention (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1987; Wilder, 1993; Woodard et al., 2001). Learning community participants commented on their relationships with faculty. However, freshman seminar participants did not comment on interactions with faculty. These results suggest that learning community participation increases faculty interaction more so than freshman seminar participation. This supports the finding of other research

finding of Cross (1998), Dodge and Kendall (2004), and Blackhurst et al., (2003) who found learning community participation increased student interactions with faculty.

“Most of my professors were awesome and would answer any questions I had”

“I loved my professors”

“I learned that I had to go to the professors to get to know them and for help”

Impact of Learning Community or Freshman Seminar course

Participant comments regarding participation in the freshman seminar course and/or the learning community differed greatly between the two groups. Participants in the success strategy group provided comments that were mixed in regard to the helpfulness of freshman seminar course. However, the participants in the learning community group had positive things to say about their participation in the learning community, as well as the freshman seminar course that was part of the learning community curriculum.

“However, assuming that this survey is mostly about the impact of learning communities and university courses, I was able to succeed without a learning community and I do not feel that my university course helped me very much”

“Success strategies, UNIV 105, however, I feel had little impact on this (learning a lot)”

“This was when I took the UNIV course with my learning community, enjoyed my teacher and the student in my community”

“I learned valuable study and time management skills through my learning community.”

“The learning community provided a small school feel while at such a large university.

It also helped my grades because I studied with people in my learning community”

“I believe that being in a learning community gave me an advantage and has already proved to be helpful this far into my sophomore year”

Self-Evaluation of the First year

Participants in both groups indicated general success during the first academic year. The impact of freshman year academic success has been shown to impact future retention and these results indicate that participants in both groups began the sophomore year with a general feeling of academic success.

“I did very well in classes and came out with a high GPA and was on the dean’s list both semesters”

“My grades were decent”

“I had a 3.64 GPA coming into this fall semester and I’m really proud of that”

“I made it through just fine”

Motivation

Participants in both group noted struggles with motivation during the first academic year. Results suggest that students faced similar issues related to motivation regardless of learning community or freshman seminar participation.

“I wasn’t willing to apply myself”

“Classes were generic and not very personable but I was bored, just not excited to go to class”

“The only thing I wish I could have done differently is that I definitely could have made straight A’s had I applied myself more.”

“I had a lot of problems with motivation because I didn’t take any classes for my major and I was feeling like there was not point in being here”

Impact on Sophomore Year

Statements from both groups indicated similarities related to second year issues. While most students noted a positive difference from freshman to sophomore year, there were a few comments indicating continuing struggles with issues faced during the freshman year. Results support previous research that both learning community and freshman seminar programs aid in the transition to the sophomore year (Barefoot, 2000; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984). However, the results failed to show a distinction between the two groups

“I feel like I have been able to grasp onto more of my identity and who I want to be as a person. I have also been finding a lot of joy and satisfaction from the material that I have been learning in class, which is a good sign that I’m pointing in the right direction”
I am looking more into this year as the year to break out and find out what my purpose here is for”

“It was a learning experience and now as a sophomore; I am doing a lot better in my classes”

“Freshman year definitely helped to prepare me for my sophomore year”

“I did better during my first year at Auburn than I am doing now”

“Even through my second year here at Auburn I have struggled greatly not to resort to my old practices of procrastination”

Peer Relationships

The importance of peer relations to student retention has been well noted in the literature (Astin, 1984; Nora 2001-2002, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, the development of peer groups is an integral part of the learning

community model (Smith et al., 2004). The statement below by the freshman seminar student indicates a desire to form social connections. Statements by learning community participants indicate an acknowledgment of the need for peer relationships; however, they describe varying experiences within the learning community models related to the ease of forming social connections. This suggests that development of peer relationships was not consistent throughout each learning community.

“I was looking more for social connections than trying to focus on my studies”

“My wish for future freshman is that they have mentors. It’s important to have people to listen and ask for advice. I struggle with that and I wish I had known of more people who could be there for me in a brand new place”

“At first, I didn’t really socialize with people much, so I felt a little alone in my classes. Then I got to know other in my learning community (and people from the Wesley Foundation) which helped me settle in and focus more on classes. I still don’t have the best study habits, but now I can seek out others in the same classes and study with them”

Institutional Commitment

As noted in the literature review, Tinto (1975) and Berger and Milam (1999) found that institutional commitment plays an integral part in student retention. Analysis of statements by both groups showed that only learning community participants commented on commitment to the institution. These results suggest that learning community participation aids in institutional commitment, more so than freshman seminar participation alone.

“Meeting new friends and learning about the Auburn tradition while officially being a part of the Auburn family has made college life seem timeless”

“Auburn is a second more for me and I am glad I chose to come here”

Overall Satisfaction with the First year

Dissatisfaction with the college experience has been linked to sophomore year attrition (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Schriener, 2007). Participants in both groups noted general satisfaction with the first year experience. This finding relates positively to retention efforts of both learning community and freshman seminar programs. However, these results fail to support Tinto’s (1996) conclusion that learning community participation leads to higher satisfaction with the college experience.

“Loved it”

“My personal experience was very satisfying and fresh. I have learned so many new and exciting things”

“Satisfying though not as great as promised”

“Loved every minute of it”

“I wouldn’t change a single thing about my freshman year if I could go back”

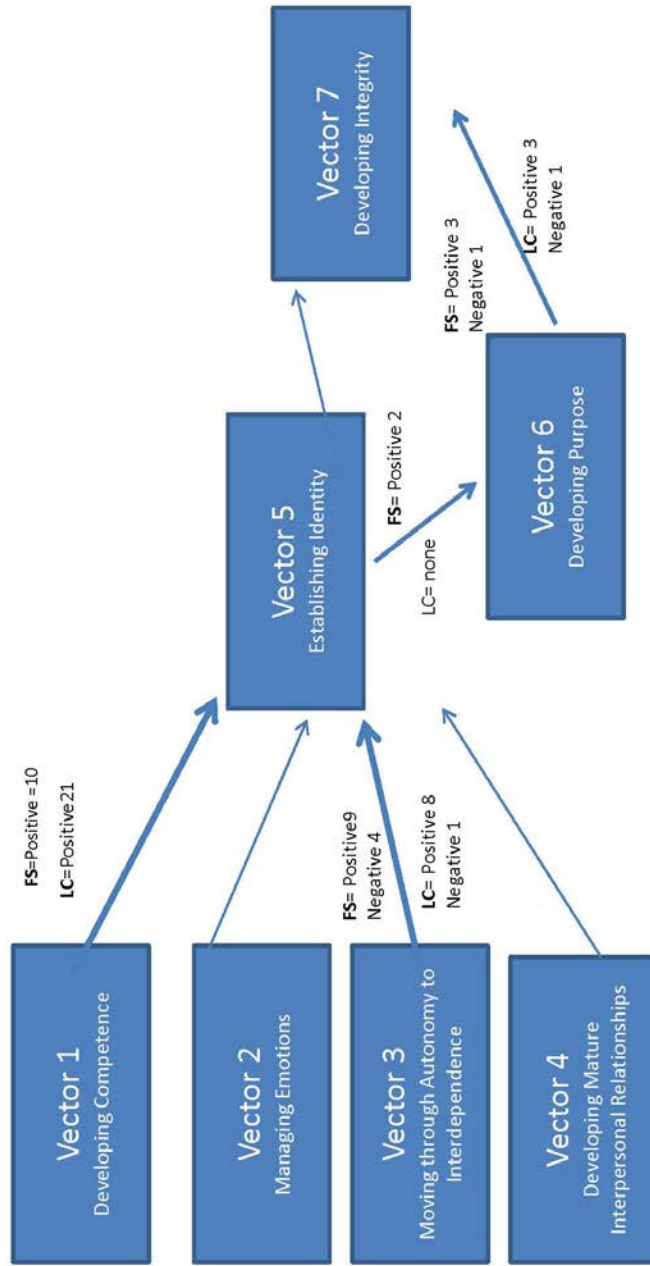


Figure 1. Synopsis of qualitative statements related to theoretical framework

Statements related to Chickering's (1969) Vectors

Statements were analyzed from participants in both groups to determine positive and negative statements related to each of the corresponding vectors. Lemons and Richmond (1987) found that the Chickering's vectors most related to sophomore slump included Developing Competence, Moving through autonomy to interdependence, Developing Identity and Finding Purpose.

Developing Competence

Developing competence encompasses intellectual competence, physical or manual competence and interpersonal competence. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that intellectual competence involve the development of intellectual sophistication as well as the ability to comprehend, analyze and synthesis information. Physical and manual competence relates to physical achievements as well as involvement in activities to increase health and wellness (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Reisser, 1995). Interpersonal competence involves the development of advanced communication skills and the development of teamwork skills. Analysis of qualitative statements by participants in both groups found positive statements related to achieving competence. There were no statements by participants in either group that indicated a decrease in level of competence. These results suggest that participants in both the learning community and the freshman seminar groups made positive developments in this vector.

“I don't think I was fully prepared to do what it took to succeed greatly my first year. I believe that I am better prepared now”

“Being a freshman at Auburn was difficulty and exciting, I was unaware of how much work and effort I was required to put in order to receive substantial grades. Since then, I have learned better ways to study for tests and how to become more organized”

“As a sophomore now, I have grown very confident and I am doing really well in school now. I take my health very seriously and I have managed to keep myself well so that I can really dedicate myself to school”

Moving through Autonomy to Interdependence

Movement in this vector involves learning to be self-sufficient, think independently and then finally develop a healthy interdependence with others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Analysis of participant statements showed that most statements related to positive progression through this vector for both groups.

“My experience was really amazing. It was exhilarating and freeing to be on my own. It took me a while to get adjusted to the new life of college and freedom, but I wouldn’t have it any other way now”

“The academics were challenging with no one to keep me on track, but I learned how to control myself early on”

I liked being in a learning community because I got to know the people in my classes very well. The learning community provided a small school feel while at such a large university. It also helped my grades because I studied with the people in my learning community”

However, there were comments by participants in both groups that indicated lack of movement within this vector.

“During my first year, my high school had prepared me for the rigors of Auburn, but I wasn’t willing to apply myself”

“I did decent, but was capable of doing better”

“I feel like the learning community could have done more for us. The only thing we were really forced to do together was take the UNIV courses. I feel like more mandatory meetings and study times would have been more helpful on top of the information we were given about our college, major, etc. I felt like the professors looked too far ahead into the future without pausing to focus on teach us and giving us more concrete tips on how to make it through the grueling core courses”

Establishing Identity

Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that the development of identity encompasses several key components: 1) comfort with the physical self and appearance; 2) comfort with gender and sexual orientation; 3) a sense of self in a social, cultural and historical context; 4) clarification of self concept through life goals; 5) understanding of feedback from others; 6) self-acceptance and self-esteem; and 7) personal stability and integration. Analysis of statements made by participants in both groups showed that only two statements related to identity development. In addition, both statements were made by members of the freshman seminar group. These results may confirm the finding of Barefoot (2000) that participation in learning communities conflicts with the concept of individualism due to the increased focus on the group.

“I feel like I have been able to grasp onto more of my identity and who I want to be as a person”

“An adjustment and a great opportunity to develop overall as a person”

Developing Purpose

Developing purpose involves the ability to assess interest, clarify goals, make plans, and persist despite the presence of obstacles (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The development of educational and career goals is key elements in this vector (Bovin et al., 2000; Widick et al., 1978). Statements related to this vector showed similarities between the learning community and the freshman seminar participants.

“I have also been finding a lot of joy and satisfaction from the material that I have been learning in class, which is a good sign that I am pointing in the right direction”

“This year, after applying myself and finding my calling, I am succeeding masterfully”

“Classes were generic and not very personable but I wasn’t bored, just not excited to go to class”

“Core classes (i.e. art) are useless towards my education. They only succeed in frustrating me”

“The UNIV class allowed me to see what my major might introduce me to in the job world. Gave me visual sustenance to affirm or disaffirm my major choice.”

Implications

While the groups in this study appeared to be very similar, the common theme between the groups is the role of commitment to academic major during sophomore year as related to sense of meaning in life. Additionally, commitment to academic major impacted the academic self-efficacy of the learning community students. These findings suggest that programming developed to assist students in developing career goals is an important part of the first and second academic year.

In addition to focusing on career and major decisions, the qualitative statements indicate that learning community students in this sample had difficulty relating core curriculum to their ultimate goals. More focus should be given to assisting students in making the connection between major and general course requirements.

Lastly, when statements were evaluated using the theoretical model, learning community students failed to comment regarding the vector of Developing Identity. Attention should be given in the learning community to ensure that group and individual goals are addressed.

Future Research

1. Because this study only included participants from a large research university in the southeast United States, this study could be replicated using participants from different types of institutions to increase the diversity of the participants while also assessing the impact of learning community participation at different types of institutions.
2. Response rates were low for the survey administered online in the study. Administering the study in a classroom setting instead of contacting students via email may increase response rates.
3. Because the freshman seminar and learning community participants appeared to be very similar, the study could be replicated using participants that did not participate in a freshman seminar course.
4. Because learning communities can vary greatly in structure, obtaining information about the type of learning community (living-learning, theme

based, major based) would provide information related to the impact of the various types of learning community implementation.

5. This study only looked at academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. The study could be replicated using a pre –test and post-test to look for changes in scores during the second academic year.
6. Developing this study into a longitudinal study would provide a look at the long-term effects of freshman learning community participation throughout each academic year.
7. No demographic data was obtained from participants. Including demographic questions would be useful in evaluating the impact of learning community participation on different groups of students.
8. Because all of the data was self-reported, GPA information could be collected from each participant to evaluate actual academic success.
9. Developing this study so that it compares participants in a living-learning community with participants in a non living-learning community to assess the impact of the residential component on sophomore success.

Conclusions

Quantitative results from the current study failed to find a significant difference between freshman seminar students and learning community students in regard to academic self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. However, the researcher did find that when students in either group self-identify as very sure of academic major, they have

significant increases in sense of meaning in life. In addition, participating in a learning community and self-identifying as being very sure of academic major was found to significantly increase academic self efficacy.

Qualitative results identified several thematic areas where learning community participants and freshman seminar participants made similar statements including: academic preparedness; skills developed during freshman year; academic challenge; adjustment; impact on sophomore year; self-evaluation; motivation; and overall satisfaction. However, analysis of the qualitative statements indicated differences between the groups related to faculty interaction, impact of learning community of freshman seminar course, peer relationships and institutional commitment. The statements made by learning community students indicated greater faculty interaction, a more positive view of the learning community and freshman seminar courses, an increased awareness of the role of peer relationships in academic success and more institutional commitment.

The analysis of qualitative statements related to Chickering's (1969) seven vectors also showed many similarities between the two groups. However, a difference was noted in the lack of statements related to the development of identity by the learning community students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

EMAIL INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

E-MAIL INVITATION FOR ON-LINE SURVEY

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to explore the impact of learning community participation on students' self reported sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. You may participate if you completed a UNIV 1000, 1050, or 1100 during the 2009-2010 academic year and are 19 years of age or older. If you are under 19 years of age, you may participate by printing the parental consent form and returning a signed copy it to 303 Mary Martin Hall. Once the permission for is received you will be emailed a link to the survey.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey that will take approximately 15 minutes.

The risks associated with this study are minimal and only relate to risks associated with universal risks associated with voluntary, anonymous survey participation.

Students that participate in this study will be entered into a drawing for an iPod Touch.

If you would like to know more information about this study, please go to the link www.auburn.edu/~pruetka. There you will find an information letter as well as parental consent documents. If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey directly from the website.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 334-844-3842 or my advisor, Dr James Groccia, at 334-844-8530

Thank you for your consideration,

Karen Pruettt

REMINDER E-MAIL INVITATION FOR ON-LINE SURVEY

Dear Student,

Two weeks ago I sent you an email inviting you to participate in my research study titled “The impact of freshman year learning community participation on students’ self-reported sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to explore the impact of learning community participation on self-reported sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to academic major. You may participate if you completed a UNIV 1000, 1050, or 1100 during the 2009-2010 academic year and are 19 years of age or older. If you are under 19 years of age you may participate by printing the parental consent form and returning a signed copy it to 303 Mary Martin Hall. Once the permission for is received you will be emailed a link to the survey.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey that will take approximately 15 minutes.

The risks associated with this study are minimal and only relate to risks associated with universal risks associated with voluntary, anonymous survey participation.

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If you would like to know more information about this study, please go to the link www.auburn.edu/~pruetka. From the website you will find an information letter as well as parental consent documents. If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey directly from the website.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 334-844-3842 or my advisor, Dr James Groccia, at 334-844-8530

Thank you for your consideration,

Karen Pruettt

Appendix B

PERMISSION TO USE INSTRUMENT

From: "Laurie Schreiner" <lschreiner@apu.edu>
To: "Karen Pruett" <pruetka@auburn.edu>
Date: 11/20/2009 3:59 PM
Subject: RE: request to use Sophomore Experiences Survey

Dear Karen,

You are welcome to use portions of the Sophomore Experiences Survey as appropriate for your study. I would appreciate a summary of your results, once your dissertation is completed!

Best wishes,

Laurie

Laurie A. Schreiner, Ph.D.

Professor and Chair

Doctoral Programs in Higher Education

Azusa Pacific University

701 E. Foothill Blvd.

Azusa, CA 91702-7000

(626)815-5349

fax (626)815-5408

lschreiner@apu.edu

From: Karen Pruett [mailto:pruetka@auburn.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, November 17, 2009 6:52 AM
To: Laurie Schreiner
Subject: request to use Sophomore Experiences Survey

Dr. Schreiner

I am a graduate student at Auburn University in the Higher Education Administration Ph.D. program. I am in the process of completing my dissertation proposal to present to my committee and plan to begin research in the Fall of 2010. I am interested in looking at first semester sophomores to evaluate if students that participated in a learning community score higher on measures of sophomore success than those that did not participate in a freshman learning community. My hope is to evaluate if learning communities are providing students with skills and experiences that will aid in retention and success beyond the freshman year. Do they begin the sophomore year scoring higher on

measures of success than non-LC students?

In researching my topic I came across the Sophomore Experience Survey and think that it would be a valuable assessment to utilize in my research. I would like to request permission to use portions of the Sophomore Experience survey.

This is still a work in progress, as I am still working out the details with my committee. However, I will be happy to share more information as it takes shape. Also, I welcome any suggestions you have on the use of the assessment or the research area.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Karen Pruett

Karen A. Pruett, M.Ed., NCC
Career Development Services
303 Martin hall
Auburn University
334-844-3842

Appendix C
ORIGINAL INSTRUMENT

Sophomore Experiences Survey (Schreiner, 2007)

In order to better understand the experiences of students in their second year of college, we would like you to please respond to each of the sections below.

The college/university you attend (drop down menu)

Did you transfer here? _yes _no

Please rate your agreement with each of the items by using a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree and 5 indicating "strongly agree."

	SD	SA
I am learning a lot in most of my classes.	1 2 3 4 5	
I often discuss with my friends what I am learning in class.	1 2 3 4 5	
I regularly participate in class discussions in most of my classes.	1 2 3 4 5	
I feel as though I am learning things in my classes that are worthwhile to me as a person.	1 2 3 4 5	
I can usually find ways to apply what I am learning in class to something else in my life.	1 2 3 4 5	
I ask my professors questions during class if I do not understand something.	1 2 3 4 5	
In the last week, I've been bored in class a lot of the time.	1 2 3 4 5	
I find myself thinking about what I'm learning in class even when I'm not in class.	1 2 3 4 5	
Sometimes I am afraid to participate in class.	1 2 3 4 5	
I feel energized by the ideas I am learning in most of my classes.	1 2 3 4 5	
I usually think about how the topics being discussed in class might be connected to things I have learned in previous class periods.	1 2 3 4 5	
Often I find my mind wandering during class.	1 2 3 4 5	
When I am learning about a new idea in class, I think about how I might apply it in practical ways.	1 2 3 4 5	
Sometimes I get so interested in something I am studying in class that I spend extra time trying to learn more about it.	1 2 3 4 5	
I am confident that the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run.	1 2 3 4 5	
I intend to re-enroll at this institution next year.	1 2 3 4 5	

Which of the following best describes YOU?

	Very Untrue Of Me		Very True Of Me
I know how to schedule my time to accomplish tasks.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I know how to take notes.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I know how to study to perform well on tests.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I am good at research and writing papers.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I am a very good student.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I usually do very well in school.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I find academic work interesting and absorbing.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		
I am very capable of succeeding at this institution.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7		

To what extent are each of the following statements true of you?

	Definitely False		Definitely True
I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8		

I understand my life's meaning.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Page 1 of 3							
I energetically pursue my goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
My life has a clear sense of purpose.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
There are lots of ways around any problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I've been pretty successful in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I am always looking to find my life's purpose.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I meet the goals that I set for myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I am seeking a purpose or mission in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
My life has no clear purpose.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I am searching for meaning in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Please respond to the following questions about activities on campus. How involved are you in any of the following:

	Not at all Involved				Very Involved
Student organizations on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership of student organizations on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
Fraternity or sorority.	1	2	3	4	5
Community service.	1	2	3	4	5
Campus events and activities.	1	2	3	4	5
Student government.	1	2	3	4	5
Peer mentoring and leadership programs.	1	2	3	4	5

For each of the following items, please report how often you have engaged in each activity during your sophomore year.

	Never	Neutral	Frequently		
Met with professor during office hours.	1	2	3	4	5
Discussed career plans or goals with a professor.	1	2	3	4	5
Met informally or socially with a faculty member outside of class or office hours.	1	2	3	4	5
Discussed academic issues with a faculty member outside of class or office hours.	1	2	3	4	5
Met with your academic advisor.	1	2	3	4	5

Finally, please tell me a little about yourself. Your answers will be grouped with those of other students to help us understand our student better. No individual information will be reported for any reason.

Are you the first in your immediate family to attend college? ___ yes ___no

Gender: female male Age:

What is the HIGHEST degree you see yourself obtaining at some point in your life?

none bachelor's teaching credential master's degree doctorate
 medical or law degree

Do you live on campus? yes no

Are you a student athlete? yes no

Race/ethnicity African-American American Indian/Alaskan Native
 Asian-American/Pacific Islander Caucasian/White
 Hispanic Multiracial

Please insert the number of hours you work per week on and off campus in paid employment.

How sure are you of your major?

Very Unsure Somewhat Unsure Somewhat Sure Very Sure

How often have you participated in service learning courses in college?

Not at all one course more than one course

Have you participated in a learning community in college? yes no

How many courses have you dropped or withdrawn from since beginning college?

none 1 2-3 3-4 6 or more

Have you traveled outside the U.S. since entering college? no for two week or less for more than two weeks

How satisfied are you with the amount you are learning in college so far?

very dissatisfied dissatisfied neutral satisfied very satisfied

Rate your overall satisfaction with your experiences on this campus so far:

very dissatisfied dissatisfied neutral satisfied very satisfied

Rate your overall satisfaction with the amount of contact you have had with faculty this year:

very dissatisfied dissatisfied neutral satisfied very satisfied

Rate your satisfaction with your peers this year:

very dissatisfied dissatisfied neutral satisfied very satisfied

Rate your satisfaction with the advising experiences you had this year:

very dissatisfied dissatisfied neutral satisfied very satisfied

Compared to your first year of college, has this year been:

much worse worse about the same better much better

When you chose to enroll in this institution, was it your first choice? yes no

Student ID

Appendix D

ADAPTED INSTRUMENT

20. Where did you live during the summer of 2010?

Primary Permanent Residence On-Campus Housing Off-campus Housing Other (*explain*)

Please use the space below to answer this following question?

21. Describe your experiences during your first academic year?

Appendix E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS



The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 8/16/10 to 8/15/11 Protocol # 10-155 EP 1008

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by keeping the information anonymous. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting.

If you have questions about this study, contact Karen Pruett at 334-844-3842, pruetka@auburn.edu or Dr. James Groccia at 334-844-8530, groccje@auburn.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at hsubjcc@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. A LINK TO THIS FORM IS PROVIDED SO THAT YOU CAN OBTAIN A COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Karen Pruett 7/27/10

Investigator's signature Date

Karen Pruett

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from _____ to _____. Protocol # _____



The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 8/16/10 to 8/15/11 Protocol # 10-155 EP 1008

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.

INFORMATION LETTER

for a Research Study entitled

"The impact of freshman year learning community participation on students' self reported sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year"

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the impact of learning community participation on students' self reported sense of meaning in life, academic self-efficacy and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. The study is being conducted by Karen Pruet, a doctoral candidate, under the direction of Dr. James Groccia, Associate Professor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology. You were selected as a possible participant because you completed a UNIV course during the 2009-2010 academic year and are age 19 or older.

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete an online survey. Your total time commitment will be approximately 15 minutes.

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and only relate to risks associated with universal risks associated with voluntary, anonymous survey participation. To minimize these risks, we will provide a list of mental health resources at the conclusion of the survey. You may contact me at pruetka@auburn.edu if you have questions about the resources available. You are responsible for any costs associated with medical treatment.

If you participate in this study, you can expect to reflect on your experiences during the freshman year and how that impacts your sense of meaning in life, academic self efficacy, and commitment to academic major at the beginning of the second academic year. Participants will benefit through further understanding of student development in general. We/I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

To thank you for your time you will be entered into a drawing to win a new iPod Touch. Upon completion of the online survey, participants will be redirected to form where they can enter the drawing for the iPod Touch.

Names and contact information will be collected separately from survey responses. If all students invited complete the survey, the chances of winning are 1 in 2014.

Page 1 of 2

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072

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AUBURN
UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance
307 Sanford Hall
Auburn University, AL 36849

Telephone: 334-844-5966
Fax: 334-844-4391
hsubjec@auburn.edu

August 24, 2010

MEMORANDUM TO: Ms. Karen Pruett
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology

PROTOCOL TITLE: "The Impact of Freshman Year Learning Community Participation on Students' Self Reported Sense of Meaning in Life, Academic Self Efficacy and Commitment to Academic Major at the Beginning of the Second Academic Year"

IRB AUTHORIZATION NO: 10-155 EP 1008

APPROVAL DATE: August 16, 2010
EXPIRATION DATE: August 15, 2011

The above referenced protocol was approved by IRB Expedited procedure under 45 CFR 46.110 (Category #7):

"Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

You should report to the IRB any proposed changes in the protocol or procedures and any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others. Please reference the above authorization number in any future correspondence regarding this project.

If you will be unable to file a Final Report on your project before August 15, 2011, you must submit a request for an extension of approval to the IRB no later than July 22, 2011. If your IRB authorization expires and/or you have not received written notice that a request for an extension has been approved prior to August 15, 2011, you must suspend the project immediately and contact the Office of Research Compliance for assistance.

A Final Report will be required to close your IRB project file. You are reminded that you must use copies of the IRB-approved consents when you consent your participants, and keep signed copies in a secure campus location for three years after your study ends.

If you have any questions concerning this Board action, please contact the Office of Research Compliance.

Sincerely,

Kathy Jo Ellison, RN, DSN, CIP
Chair of the Institutional Review Board
for the Use of Human Subjects in Research

cc: Ms. Sherida Downer
Dr. James Groccia



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contact information will be collected separately from survey responses. If all students invited complete the survey, the chances of winning are 1 in 2014.

If you (or your child) change your mind about your child's participation, your child can be withdrawn from the study at any time. Your child's participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw your child, your child's data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to allow your child to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize you or your child's future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology.

Your child's privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Information obtained through your child's participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, presented at a professional meeting.

If you (or your child) have questions about this study, contact Karen Pruett at 334-844-3842, pruetka@auburn.edu or Dr. James Groccia at 334-844-8530, groccje@auburn.edu. Please feel free to make a copy of this document for your records.

If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at hsubjec@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH FOR YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR CHILD'S SIGNATURE INDICATES HIS/HER WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's signature Date

Printed Name

Parent/Guardian Signature Date

Printed Name

Karen Pruett 7/28/10

Investigator obtaining consent Date

Karen Pruett

Printed Name

Page 2 of 2

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 8/16/10 to 8/15/11 Protocol # 10-155 EP 1008